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What the Mills affair reveals about the PM, Aspers

By JEFFREY SIMPSON
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Freedom of the press has just suffered a terrible blow in Canada from a combination of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's personal furies and the lickspittle owners of CanWest Global Communications Corp.

That blow illustrates the potential perils of media concentration and a de facto one-party state, both of which are so evident in this country.

The victim of the latest blow was Russell Mills, a respected member of the Ottawa community and publisher of The Ottawa Citizen. The day after Mr. Mills received a deserved honorary degree from Carleton University for his service to journalism and worthy causes in Ottawa, the Aspers, who own CanWest, rode into town and fired him.

Then, yesterday morning, they marched into the offices of Scott Anderson, the newspaper's editor, and reamed him out for the same reason they fired Mr. Mills -- for being too tough on their hero, Mr. Chrétien, whose recent fundraising dinner in Winnipeg was partly organized by a member of the Asper family.

So much for the Aspers' declarations of their newspapers' editorial independence and journalistic integrity. Their promises in those areas are as worthless as some of the ones they give the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission for their television licences.

The publicly given reason for Mr. Mills's downfall was a form of corporate insubordination; the real reason was the Aspers' craven attitude toward Mr. Chrétien.

They had already fired Southam columnist Lawrence Martin because they and the Prime Minister disliked his writing about Mr. Chrétien's attempts to get government money to bail out a hotel next to a golf course in which he had an interest. They dumped the publisher of the Montreal Gazette, Michael Goldbloom, for allowing tiny bits of criticism of Israel in his paper.

Then they imposed badly written and drearily argued "national" editorials on their Southam papers, including one that showered praise on the beleaguered

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Prime Minister.

Not surprisingly, fear and loathing about the Aspers now permeate the entire Southam chain of newspapers, except among corporate flunkies afraid for their jobs and pensions. (I know a whole bunch of Southam journalists across Canada, and not one has a good thing to say privately about the Aspers.) And now, the cashiering of a courageous publisher and the dressing down of a fine editor ostensibly because they didn't check with head office in Winnipeg before lambasting the chap at 24 Sussex Dr.

Little did any of us expect when the Aspers bought Southam from Conrad Black how creepy would be their journalistic standards. It almost makes you pine for Lord Black, although he didn't exactly give his editors free rein, either.

The Mills affair is just one among many that illustrates what can happen in a de facto one-party state. Cronyism becomes rampant. Abuses of power proliferate. Arrogance goes unchecked. People with federal government interests know who's buttering the bread.

The great and the mighty -- at least in their own minds -- want to curry favour with those who wield political power, and especially with the man who holds so much power in our system of government, the Prime Minister.

And all these perils of a one-party state with such a concentration of power become magnified with an extremely vengeful and increasingly paranoid Prime Minister and his friends who will get you if you cross them.

Other Southam editorials had harshly criticized the Prime Minister. But Mr. Chrétien doesn't read the papers in Western Canada the way he and his people read the Citizen each morning.

In firing Mr. Mills, the Aspers rid themselves of someone universally respected in the Ottawa community. Mr. Mills had supported a wide variety of charitable and artistic institutions, often turning over free advertising to these groups.

Mr. Mills had been honoured with various civic awards, including one for his paper's work in promoting literacy and the public library. He was considered the ultimate survivor as a newspaper publisher, having faithfully served various owners whose commercial and journalistic approaches he publicly supported. The paper had remained solidly profitable under his leadership.

But economics had nothing to do with his dismissal. The Aspers tried to make Mr. Mills sign a letter of resignation accompanied by an agreement to remain silent about the circumstances of his departure. He refused, saying he had been too long in journalism to sign something untrue. He was being fired, and he wanted people to know it and the reasons why. The quintessential company man couldn't stomach it, and that speaks volumes about his treatment and those who administered it.

A five-paragraph story appeared in the Citizen on Monday morning announcing his departure, but the story said nothing about the circumstances. A CanWest spokesman said only that it was an internal company affair, which it would have been but for the motives, the political angle, and the chilling effect it must have on other Southam editors and publishers.

They had already been put on notice that all local editorials must generally toe the line of the "national" editorials and memorandums emanating from Winnipeg.

They will now know that firings and reprimands will loom if they deviate

from that policy.
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