

A late note on Samara's list of best Canadian political books

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I'm arriving very late to the party over at Samara, where they took on the fun task of drawing up a list of Canada's best political books. Some of the titles that made the cut are favourites of mine (Michael Bliss's *Right Honourable Men*, Christina McCall's *Grits*), while others (Charles Taylor's *Radical Tories*, Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*) remind me that I've got some reading to do.

I might quibble here (Lawrence Martin's *Iron Man: The Defiant Reign of Jean Chrétien*, but not the revelatory preceding volume *Chrétien: The Will to Win?*) and there (*Leaders and Lesser Mortals* by John Laschinger and Geoffrey Stevens, but not Stevens's fine solo bio *The Player: The Life & Times of Dalton Camp?*), but by and large I find the Samara lists comprehensive and persuasive.

Still, casting an eye over their catalogue, I'm reminded of how often the most penetrating political insights are found in books that we would not put on the politics shelf. I'm sure examples would spring to any reader's mind. For me, Northrop Frye's slim *The Modern Century*, published in 1967 to coincide with Canada's centennial, is the prime case of a book that made me think differently about politics, even though it's not about parties or elections or leaders.

Frye write about how hard it is – given our age's incessant soundtrack of commercial and political spin, as copy, PR hype and on-message blather – to keep from being bludgeoned into a passive stupor. Resisting everything in the air makes a person feel anti-social. “When propaganda cuts off all other sources of information,” he observes, “rejecting it, for a concerned and responsible citizen, would not only isolate him from his social world, but isolate him so completely as to destroy his self-respect.”

Thinking too much is stigmatized as snobbery. Let's say you read up on global warming and conclude that a carbon tax is the way to go; *The Modern Century* prepares you to be dismissed as an out-of-touch elitist. “Democracy is a mixture of majority rule and minority right,” says Frye, “and the minority which most clearly has a right is the minority of those who try to resist a passive response, and thereby risk the resentment of those who regard them as trying to be undemocratically superior.”

A truly active, original response is almost always attacked. On the other hand, a phony sense of urgency is encouraged. We're bombarded with messages pretending to be important, like so many emails flagged with red exclamation marks.

When aren't farms in crisis, schools nearly useless, small towns dying, cities decaying or sprawling or both, the armed forces all but without the necessary arms, the artists all but without the necessary grants, the economy on the brink? You hear it all the time. “The conscious appeal is to the concerned and intelligent citizen who ought to take an interest in

what his public servants are trying to do,” Frye writes. “A less conscious motive is to prepare him for an increase in taxes.”

He goes on: “Something has happened to atrophy one’s responses when the most soporific words one can use are such words as ‘challenge,’ ‘crisis,’ ‘demand,’ and ‘endeavour.’” In other words, any call to action is likely to have the opposite effect.

I’m touching almost randomly on a fraction of what Frye surveys. Most of *The Modern Century* isn’t really about politics, unless you’re of a mind to think everything is political, which is not such a bad idea. Frye always covers a lot of territory, so it’s worse than futile to try put a simple label on anything he wrote, or to draw a pat lesson.

Still, I’d say this is a lasting point he tries to plant in the mind of the attentive reader of *The Modern Century* who happens to have the good fortune to live in a rich democracy like Canada: “The most permanent kind of mob rule is not anarchy, nor is it the dictatorship that regularized anarchy, nor even the imposed police state depicted by Orwell. It is rather the self-policing state, the society incapable of formulating an articulate criticism of itself and developing a will to act in its light.”