

August 19, 2009

OttawaWatch 236: A response to *The Family*

By Lloyd Mackey

Jack Murta, as of 2022, is still the “shepherd” of Canada’s prayer breakfast movement, including its annual Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast.

*For a while, during the 90s, Sharet, in the United States and Marci McDonald in Canada, wrote columns and books that described the prayer breakfast movement as being, among other things, secretive and theocratic in their interfacing with political leaders. McDonald’s book *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*, portrayed in rather sinister fashion, her alleged links between evangelical Christianity and political conservatism.*

A book called *The Family: the Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (Harper Perennial, 2008), by Jeff Sharlet, is getting a little attention these days, south of the border.

And a smidgen, as well, north of selfsame border. Sharlet was interviewed on CBC a couple of weeks ago. In the process, he was asked if there is a Canadian link. Yes, he replied, and he is looking forward to researching it next.

He allowed that the Canadian story is a little different because our equivalent to *The Family* is seemingly much more transparent.

I know what Sharlet is talking about by the moniker of “the prayer breakfast movement.” Its main public focal point is the annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast, which draws about 4,000 people to Washington, D.C. annually for a focus centred on the person of Jesus.

In Canada, the link is the National Prayer Breakfast which, in recent years, has grown from about 300 people to close to 900. And, Jack Murta, a former Mulroney cabinet minister who shepherds whatever part of the parliamentary flock who want to be involved, agrees with Sharlet’s contention of transparency. He is also a bit curious to see what the American journalist will discover when he starts his research on Canada.

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Being a typical mushy, middle-of-the-road Canadian Christian, I would observe that too much secrecy, as Sharlet is alleging with respect to the prayer breakfast movement, is a bad thing. And, interestingly enough, so is too much transparency.

One of the hallmarks of the movement, as I have observed it, is the intensity – and integrity – with which its leaders will work to help politicians and diplomats of all sorts to understand what the life and person of Jesus can bring to their lives and work. To put it

colloquially, they understand that you can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make that horse drink.

By too much transparency, I mean the tendency of some Christian leaders to be publicity hounds. They like to be in the limelight so much, sometimes, that *Soli Deo Gloria* gets pushed to the side. (Colossians 3:17 will provide an interpretation to that little bit of Latin.)

But, in working quietly with leaders, with the clear focus of leading them to Jesus, and nurturing them to an understanding of what he is about, the prayer breakfast people I know strike the right balance – both in Canada and the United States.

In *More Faithful than we think: Stories and Insights on Canadian Leaders Doing Politics Christianly* (BayRidge Books, 2005), I have a chapter titled *Bobbie: Getting it Together*. It tells about a 13-year-old boy who grew up to be an American congressman. The story about how he got there can be retold another time.

But the point of the prayer breakfast movement is summarized in the congressman's recounting of the reasons why he gets together each week with a few of his fellow politicians

Their main objectives, paraphrased, go as follows.

They gather to:

- Get to know Jesus better.
- See what the Bible says about how they should live.
- Make sure they walk straight.
- Be accountable to each other and to God.
- Pray together.

The adult “Bobbie” and his group members are all Christians or Christ-seekers. They come in several different stripes and are at several points along their faith pilgrimages. Politically, some are conservative Republicans; others are liberal Democrats. But their common faith and/or spiritual goals, in getting to know Jesus, help them to do politics Christianly.

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