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Ottawa *Watch* 315: Two voices

By Lloyd Mackey

Since this was written, Whyte published Maclean's for several more years, chaired a think tank on Canadian history and politics at McGill University and, the last I heard, was do specialty book publishing in the educational and historical area.

And this week, Paul Wells announced his resignation from Maclean's. No new plans announced but I would predict it will be in journalism or publishing and will be exotic and/or innovative.

By the way, Paul married Lisa Samson a few years ago. People involved in the early days of the Reform party and western-based faith/political activity, will remember Lisa and being involved in Reform research work as well as some roles in World Vision Canada, the Christian humanitarian organization. In my modest view, they are a fine, small-p power couple.

Two journalists whose works are worth watching, for the next few years, are Ken Whyte and Paul Wells, both of *Maclean's Magazine*. Whyte is editor and publisher and Wells, one of its preeminent columnists and bloggers.

Both have a fair understanding of what has happened in western-shaped politics over the past quarter century, from the emergence of Preston Manning's Reform to the election, this past May, of the Stephen Harper Conservative majority government.

Both were present at the "Report Reunion" event in Edmonton on September 15.

Whyte was a senior editor at *Alberta Report* during that fateful autumn in 1986. That was when *Report* founder Ted Byfield (now 83) and Manning began a level of communication which became an essential ingredient in the renewal of western-based, populist, somewhat-faith-rooted conservatism.

Just for the record; I was there, too, as a bit player.

Neither Whyte nor Wells, as far as I am aware, openly espouses an adherence to any particular branch of Christianity. But both have practiced journalism in and around the faith-political interface long enough to be able to provide some pretty accurate interpretations of the phenomenon.

Whyte has played a foundational role in the ability of many Canadian journalists to grasp both the faith-political interface and the development of western-rooted conservatism, during his tenure as editor of the *National Post* and, subsequently, *Maclean's*.

Wells has written one perceptive book (*Right Side Up: The Fall of Paul Martin and the Rise of Stephen Harper's New Conservatism*) on the various influences around Stephen Harper. He is working, now, on a second.

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When returning to Ottawa from Edmonton, I chatted briefly with Whyte, at the Edmonton airport. He made the observation that Byfield and Manning spoke with “two different voices.” I knew he was not talking about voiceprints. True, Manning’s friendly squawk and Byfield’s thunderous growl are superficial trademarks of the two men.

But using their respective takes on the role of faith in politics, Whyte’s thesis (or at least my interpretation of it) could centre on Byfield’s declaration that one of *Report’s* assumptions was it “would be Christian. As simple as that. What do I mean by that? I mean the belief that the creeds of the Christian church were simply true.”

Manning’s take was not dwelled on at any length in Edmonton. But certainly a part of the faith-political interface workshops he and Wes McLeod have initiated in the past decade have focused on teaching Christians to be, in biblical parlance, “as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves.” And his major illustration, as the historical figure from which people of faith could learn to engage the political beast, was William Wilberforce, the 18th century figure who worked for almost half a century to abolish the British slave trade.

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Herein enters Paul Wells.

In his September 23 piece in *Maclean’s*, Wells follows up his quoting of Byfield on the Christian creeds, with a reference to United Church minister Bill Blaikie, the former deputy leader of the federal NDP. He notes:

Now all kinds of people believe they are being true to Christian faith. Bill Blaikie sat in the House of Commons for a quarter-century, defending his conception of the social gospel for the NDP.”

In some of his faith-political interface events, Manning has given free rein to Blaikie, to enunciate his social gospel ideas in front of largely social conservative – albeit friendly – audiences.

That has led, at times, to the ability of Manning *aficionados* to listen and understand the concerns of social gospellers, then to propose solutions that drew from the wellsprings of conservative theology and ideology.

And that, from this corner, appears to be one way of interpreting Whyte’s two-voice suggestion.