

Irish Times 15.11.10

Rebel journalists thumb their noses at media magnate

By Lorraine Mallinder

In Quebec, he's known simply by his initials: PKP. The media magnate is known to be a lean, mean machine - on the slopes and in the boardroom. His glamorous partner, mother of his two children, is queen of francophone talk TV and confidante to Céline Dion.

Pierre Karl Péladeau's star is on the rise. Head of Quebecor Inc., a conglomerate merging media, publishing and telecoms interests across Canada, he is set to get even bigger with plans to launch a right-leaning news channel teasingly dubbed 'Fox News North'.

Everything would be perfect, it seems, were it not for the pesky ragtag of scrappy journalists yapping at his heels. Almost two years ago, they were locked out of their Montreal newsroom in what has become the longest-running media dispute in Canadian history, a bitter conflict over pay cuts, job losses and convergence issues.

It wasn't just any newsroom. *Journal de Montréal* is one of the cornerstones of the Quebecor empire, a racy tabloid filled with sex, scandal and sports, founded in the mid-sixties by PKP's *papa*, the late Pierre Péladeau. Today, it is a city institution.

Out on the street, the 253 employees – including reporters, photographers, copy editors and office staff – remember Péladeau senior, a hard-drinking manic depressive and fervent nationalist, with misty-eyed nostalgia. They feel betrayed by the chisel-jawed son running the empire that they helped build.

Beaten but unbowed, they rented the building next door to the newspaper's red brick offices and with "a handful of dollars and some geeks" built a website to host a rival news service called Rue Frontenac, named after their street. Their logo: a cannon.

I visit the day before the launch of their rival newspaper, a weekly freesheet by the same name. Richard Bousquet, the jocular coordinator of the whole project, hops from foot to foot as he leads a tour of the rundown premises. A small team of journalists rush to deadline under naked light bulbs hanging from wires in the ceiling.

"We're thumbing our noses at them," says Bousquet, casting a defiant glance out of the window. "You threw us out, but we know we're good and we're gonna show you." Revenge is in the air - a couple of weeks earlier, the banished employees had overwhelmingly rejected a Faustian bargain offering CA\$20 million in severance payments for the 200-odd employees standing to lose their jobs. In exchange, they would have had to observe a six-month ban on working for competitors, close down their website and ditch their plans for the freesheet.

Their overwhelming rejection of the offer prompted a fresh wave of public support, with the mayor of the local borough declaring war on the *Journal de Montréal* on his blog,

exhorting it to get off his territory. Overnight, the journalists had become local heroes. On the eve of their inauguration edition, morale is high.

It seems the struggle has created worthier journalists. While the sports reporters took their readers with them, they have otherwise attracted a more politically aware readership. A quick browse of the next day's headlines on the proofs cluttering the walls of the tiny production room reveals not one celebrity nipple in sight. Instead, there is a hard-hitting investigation of the pro-life lobby and a rather sombre report on the US mid-terms. "Before, the journalists were more managed," says Bousquet. "Now, they choose their own angles."

Reporter Gabrielle Duchaine says she feels she has returned to "the essence of what journalism is really about". Pampered in her old job with junkets and gadgets, the lockout was a bit of a "reality check", she says. "I carried on working because it made me feel useful, but now we have the potential to create something new. It's given us a new lease of life," she says.

Maybe it's the collective sense of idealism, but the office ambiance is redolent of a student newspaper. The walls are filled with strike memorabilia, fluorescent campaign stickers, emails from supporters, and pictures of leftie heroes. There are also unflattering depictions of PKP. One mock up of a recent magazine cover features the magnate as a "tsar in his ivory tower", with the headline "Hitler is my hero!". Perhaps the tabloid sensibilities have not been totally lost after all.

"We're saying no to mediocrity and convergence," says photographer Annik DeCarefel. She's referring to an "unlimited convergence plan" that would have had a shrunken pool of reporters taking photos and shooting videos to accompany articles, the material sliced and diced into countless formats over Quebecor's vast network of media and mobile platforms. It's a strategy that would have put the photographers out of a job. It's not as if the newspaper wasn't making a profit, she says.

Their solidarity is laudable. Still, in the current media squeeze, wouldn't the majority have been better off taking the millions and running? With union funds and donations running out, Bousquet acknowledges that they face a daunting challenge. But, the website, which has attracted decent advertising from deep-pocketed car companies, airlines and banks, is now running a surplus. He is optimistic their freesheet can eventually move to a paid model.

It's an old-fashioned strategy in a new-fangled world. With 'Fox News North' having grabbed headlines across North America, the letters PKP are now being uttered in the same breath as Canadian media titans of old, such as Conrad Black and Roy Thomson. As the journalists and photographers battle to continue exercising their craft, his rise looks set to continue unabated.