

The Public Right to Know: Accountability in the Secretive Society. JOHN CRISPO. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, ©1975. 395 p. ISBN 0 07 082248 4 \$12.95.

John Crispo has convinced himself that the fabric and objectives of North American society are so warped that without urgent positive regulatory steps taken in the public interest we shall be consumed in some awful decay of self-seeking. After fifteen years of teaching, administering and arbitrating at length in both public and private spheres, Crispo has felt able to put his finger on the symptoms and character of such social sickness. *The Public Right to Know* is his "Honest to God" sermon—a goad to self-revelation and an equally cute paradox, as the title byline declares. Unlike the amiable reflections of the good Bishop of Woolwich however, Crispo's book will not catch the public imagination for, sad to report, it is unbelievably turgid to plough through and full of conventional wisdom.

This is a great pity. His subject is eminently topical and his credentials certainly look impeccable. We do have a right to know how our money is spent, how we take advantage of each other and how we are manipulated by monstrous devices of our own making. From academic journal, magazine and newspaper Crispo draws forward one illustration after another to demonstrate how limited or warped that right to know has become. But how fervently one wishes that he had pursued the spirit of his conviction in a shorter work. Like some dessicated pedagogue, Crispo moves from topic to topic (terribly served by his publisher's oddly unbalanced and grating book design) dwelling predictably on political morality, labour and management, professional regulation and commercial practice. First he outlines the issues (pages 9 to 59), then states the apocalypse with a few words of advice on how to avoid it (pages 60 to 69) before examining each of the issues "in depth" (pages 70 to 387) and finally offering his recommendations (pages 388 to 395). What do we find? That the North American public lacks confidence in political parties and politicians (of which Watergate is the ultimate expression), that corporations have little sense of social responsibility, that advertising is an eternal exercise of deceit, that professional and union organizations hold society to ransom and that the media have a hard time both at getting the facts and at telling it the way it is. Botherome certainly, even depressing, but hardly fresh and scintillating observation. Crispo's catalogue of disorders however appropriately arranged and illuminated by years of comment does not get near to the political tract which he claims to have written and is light-years away from the shrewd, concise portrait which his experience ought to have dictated.

No doubt the archivist will take a second look at his phrases on "disclosure, exposure and public scrutiny." They are primarily directed towards business practices and of course they attempt to show how closures diminish our capacity to know what is being done against our interest. Of course! There you have it: "in the absence of public availability of more corporate data, there is every reason to be skeptical not only about what business is up to but also about how effectively it is being called to account for any abuses to which it is party." Or if you missed that one try this: "a meaningful combination of disclosure and exposure and public scrutiny can probably do as much as anything else to bring about a revitalized system of checks and balances in North America." That is very close to the end, in both senses, but the actual end is best of all: "little or nothing of true significance is likely to happen unless the political processes of North America start to produce politicians with more intelligence, convictions, ethics and leadership, and until the public begins to listen to them." The limitations of this tedious book have little to do with those admitted by the author on pages four and five—reliance on the writings of others, non-academic sources and citations—but have much more to do with the lack of penetrating thought, the banality of utterance and an atrocious style.

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