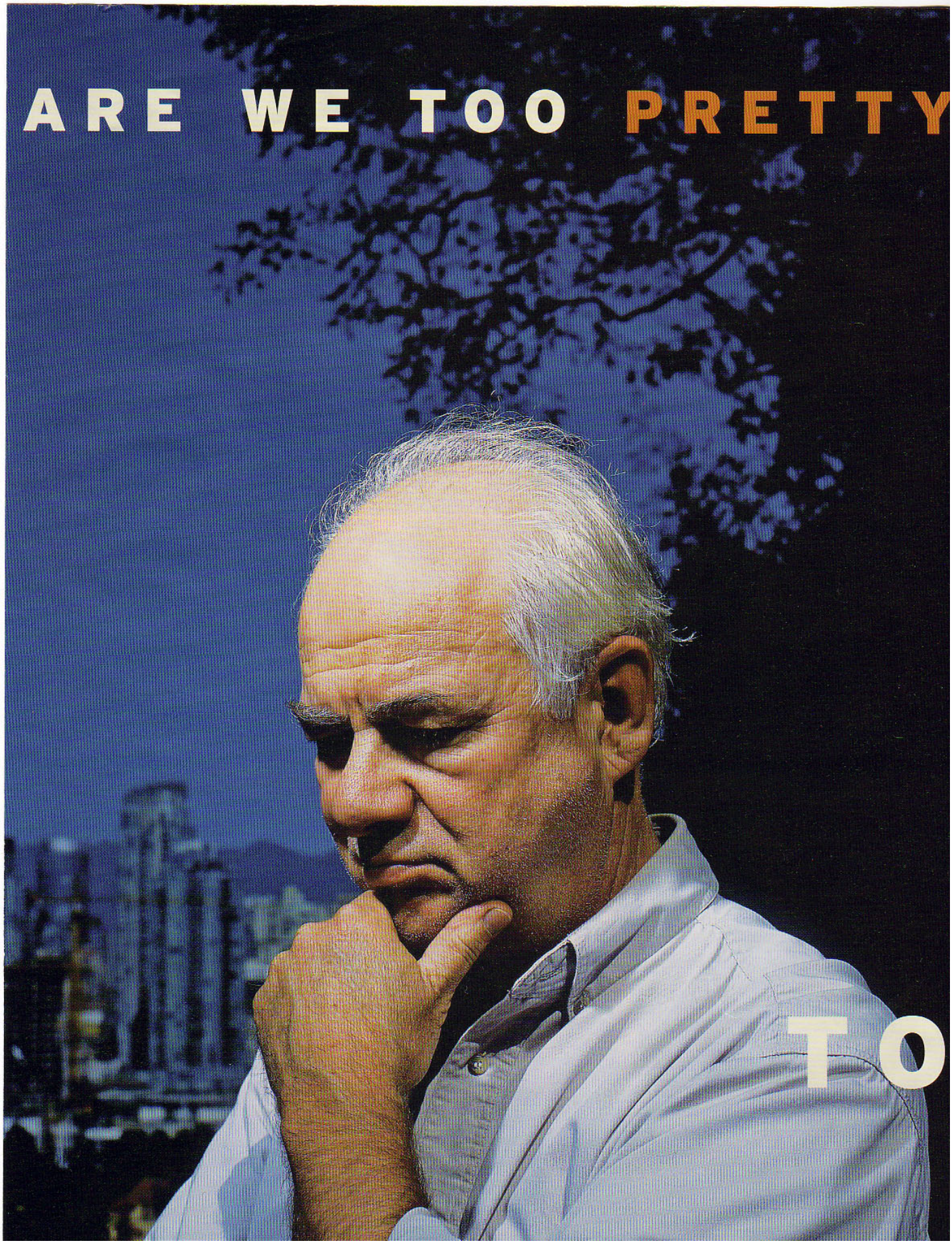

ARE WE TOO PRETTY
TO

Brains! We need brains! Opposite, Kalle Lasn, editor of *Adbusters* magazine and father of culture-jamming. This page: Joel Bakan, author of *The Corporation*.

BE SMART?

Our surroundings are drop-dead gorgeous. Is that a problem? Looking for public intellectuals who haven't been distracted by the view and the lifestyle here in the world's largest outdoor spa.

BY CHRIS TENOVE, WITH REPORTING BY HEATHER NEALE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM LABOUNTY

15 of us sit on driftwood, lawn chairs or the cool sands of Ambleside Beach in West Vancouver. Across the ocean to the west, the setting sun has ignited a thick cloud bank, which blazes with campfire oranges and reds. Above it a jet pulls a stripe of neon pink across the deep blue sky. But we 15 are trying to ignore this antic splendour. We are trying to block out the waves lapping the beach, the exuberant shrieks of children and seagulls, the whir and crash of nearby skateboarders. We are trying to ignore these things because we are here to philosophize. You can tell this by our pursed lips, our half-shuttered eyes, our stroked chins and the dark green beach umbrella that says "Philosopher's Café."

"Maybe," a plump gentleman in a Tilley hat says, "we are the universe's way of learning about itself."

There is a ripple of murmurs, which are finally articulated by the group's moderator:

"What are you *talking* about? What does that mean?"

This is my first visit to a Philosopher's Café, but I have already learned that plain language and clear arguments are preferred. This particular group meets every month to address questions of ethics, religion and metaphysics. Tonight's topic: *Is environmentalism just a way to appease the masses?*

Our comments have ranged from the erudite to the pragmatic, from Immanuel Kant quotations to "I don't think you *can* recycle Britney Spears outfits—there's not enough cloth there."

But while the group discusses the world's ecological crises, I reflect on a more local question: Is Vancouver a brainy city? Or is our town an urban airhead, beguiling and distracting us with its good looks and its cult of recreation?

I started to consider Vancouver's intellectual climate in March, while listening to an interview with Michael Byers on CBC Radio's *The Current*. Byers, then a law professor at Duke University, explained why he was leaving his prestigious position to come to Vancouver. He argued that Canada can and should become a major force in global diplomacy in the 21st century. To do this, he said, we need an invigorated intellectual sector that will brainstorm solutions for the future and inject these ideas into public debate. "I want to help create the kind of powerful intellectual think-tanks that exist in New York and London," Byers insisted. Vancouver, he seemed to be saying, really could become one of the world's intellectual capitals.

I listened and thought, Yes! Vancouver can finally shed its identity as a lumber and fish town on the edge of the continent, and become a gleaming genius-magnet, an electric hive of Big Ideas.

Then, like any good Canadian, humility kicked in.

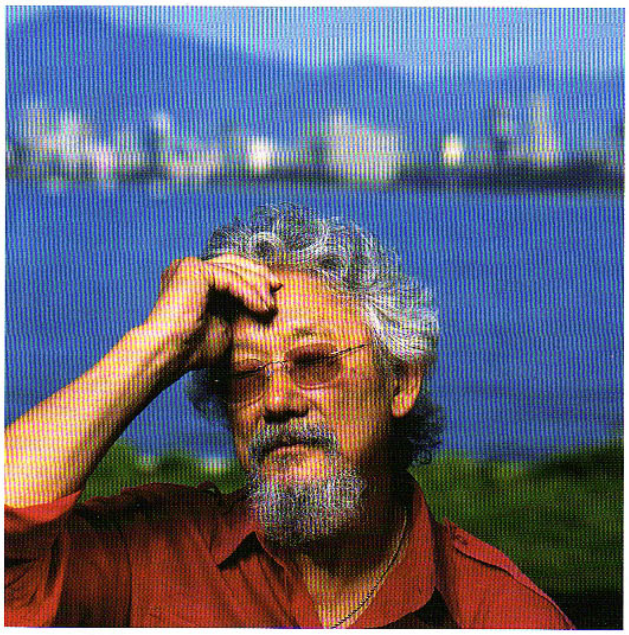
Vancouver as a marijuana capital? Sure.

A disc golf capital? I can see that.

But Vancouver as an intellectual capital? Hmmm.

Mountains Against Brains

Under our parasol at Ambleside Beach, Yosef Wosk passes around a paper bag full of licorice and basks in the discussion. This is exactly the kind of event the Simon Fraser University professor had in mind when he started the series in 1998, driven by his belief that there's a gnawing hunger for intellectual discourse in Vancouver. Over the last five years, the initiative has brought together more than 25,000 people in Lower Mainland homes, community centres and, yes, cafés. The popularity of the series might suggest that cerebral debate is as easy to find in Vancouver as sushi or Gore-Tex—but several participants admit that they come to these gatherings precisely because this kind of discussion is rare. "It's hard to get beyond superficial conversations in Vancouver," says Pam Burns, a transplanted Brit. "I didn't realize it at the time, but when I was living in England I was inside a big brain. There was a lot more innovation and intelligence. Here I find it complacent."



Green Thinker. David Suzuki is perhaps the city's best-known intellectual.

This belief— that Vancouver stifles the life of the mind—is common.

If you're looking for intellectual ferment, David Mitchell told me when we met in a Hornby Street café, look elsewhere. Even the nation's capital. "I've been in Ottawa for two years, and boy is it different," said Mitchell, a former Liberal MLA and SFU VP, now vice-president of university relations at the University of Ottawa. "An average supermarket conversation in Ottawa might be about defence policy, or economics or an art exhibit, and that is very different from Vancouver.

"People live here for the raw physical beauty of the place, and not

for the social or intellectual climate, which is amazingly poverty-stricken."

A professor at SFU put it more bluntly: "This is a place for snowboarding, and for that reason there is a sweetly anti-intellectual quality to life here."

What's the Big Idea?

On yet another idyllic summer evening I meet publisher Scott McIntyre, of Douglas & McIntyre, on the patio of the Granville Island Hotel. Waiters hover and dart among contented diners. A ketch glides past on the inlet, its sails furled. McIntyre is a proud Vancouverite, but he speaks longingly of a garden party he attended the weekend before in an Old Money District of Toronto. Swirling around him were politicians, writers, business tycoons, academics, artists, philanthropists and society mavens. Every second person seemed to be an Order of Canada recipient. There was a cosy, schmoozy feel to the evening, but McIntyre had a sense that an idea could be hatched that would force Canadians to pay attention. "You get that kind of party in New York or Toronto or Montreal," he said, "but not here....Vancouver lacks that intellectual hothouse environment."

Intellectual capitalist. Michael Byers, of UBC's Liu Institute.

But that doesn't mean there are no ideas coming out of Vancouver. To be glib, says McIntyre, Vancouver is credited with three big ideas: Generation X (coined by Douglas Coupland), the concept of cyberspace (which first appeared in William Gibson's science fiction novel *Neuromancer*) and Greenpeace (founded in a Kitsilano basement in 1971). McIntyre is confident that list will expand.

"People come here for our physical beauty, not for the frenzy of a scene," he says, "but there are people with amazing experiences and great sophistication here."

In other words, it's not just hemp-hatted hippies and snowboarders who are seduced by our postcard good looks. The beaches and ski slopes also entice the rising stars of academia, the arts and the high-tech sector. "In the knowledge industry, your inventory goes home every night," says Michael Goldberg, a business professor and associate vice-president at the University of British Columbia. "Go to Electronic Arts or other high-tech businesses, and their human resources department's problem is finding more ways to make their workers happy. And part of Vancouver's advantage is that we're a beautiful place to live."

But will great minds, once here, become anaesthetized by the scenery? That's dubious. Walk along any beach as the sun sets and you will see someone flipping through a dog-eared novel or gazing meditatively across the burnished ocean. For many of us, English Bay acts as a reflecting pond, a place where our minds can drift toward the dreamy or the profound. And some of the best ideas come during jogs through the forest or brisk, windswept strolls. It seems dated to believe that smoky cafés are more conducive to deep thought.

In fact, our environment actively provokes certain kinds of ideas. Here, with our skyline of mountains and forests as well as glass towers, we tend to think more seriously than others about how nature and man can coexist. "It's not an accident that environmental thought is so strong in Vancouver," says David Suzuki. We understand that this natural grandeur around us is both vulnerable and worth fighting for, he argues. Not only did Greenpeace begin here, but it was a Vancouver marine biologist, Daniel Pauly, who recently developed a new way to assess the entire globe's fish stocks—and startled the world with his dire evidence. It was a UBC economist who invented the concept of the "ecological footprint," a way to estimate the environmental impact of a person or a community. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it seems as if our beauty and our brains are intertwined.

The Grit in Our Oyster

But Vancouver is not just a city-size travel brochure. At the core of the city, like a yin to the yang of the beaches and mountains, is the Downtown Eastside. The neighbourhood's poverty, disease, addiction and desperation keep us from drifting too far into feel-good reverie and self-congratulation. It is too central and too anomalous for us to ignore. Ironically, the Downtown Eastside also contributes to the intellectual life of the city. It prompts human rights debates, sociological studies, even artwork—like *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, Stan Douglas's recent photo-conceptual examination of illusion and reality in the neighbourhood.

The public thinkers most identified with the Downtown Eastside are not academics or artists but municipal politicians like Larry Campbell and Jim Green. "Back in the 1990s, Campbell [then B.C.'s chief coroner] was looking at dead bodies all day and then stepping back to see the big picture," says David Beers, editor of online magazine *The Tyee*. "He saw the problem with drugs in Vancouver and the opportunities for harm reduction strategies.

"You can't change drug policy without sophisticated research on policy and health, but you can't affect policy unless you are very public. He ran an entire election on this and won. You can't be any more

Ironically, the Downtown Eastside contributes to the intellectual life of the city. It prompts debates, studies, art.

public than that with your ideas."

But more than Campbell, Jim Green plays the public intellectual's role. He's the one who studied at the Sorbonne, who hosts public discussions with people like Jane Jacobs and Noam Chomsky, and who has spent decades transforming ideas about city planning into policies and institutions.

"People are constantly looking at Vancouver as a place of enlightenment," says Green, whether it's the design of sustainable communities or finding new ways to address the kinds of problems found in the Downtown Eastside. To take one example: when a city runs the only legal heroin injection site in North America, it can set the agenda for research into drug harm reduction strategies.

Vancouver's municipal pols can seem like philosopher kings and queens when compared to their colleagues in Victoria, where the battle between British Columbia's right-wing populists and hard-core labourites discourages intellectual innovation. The effect of the province's partisanship is evident in our local think-tanks, says Michael Goldberg of UBC. "We have the right-wing Fraser Institute and the left-wing Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and those are the only two think-tanks we have here," he says. "They are metaphors for what doesn't work in society—an ideological and dichotomous view of the world."

The most innovative and exciting idea to come from the provincial Liberal government happens to be its least ideological one. Governments and academics around the world are watching the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform to see if B.C. has found a way for average citizens to tackle complex and highly partisan issues. "We are creating a new social tool," says Jack Blaney, chair of the Assembly. "If you want an idea that will put Vancouver on the map, this is it."

A Land Far, Far Away

Vancouver is not just Canada's most beautiful city; it is the one most distant from the bastions of power. We live on the periphery, on the far edge of the continent, in the newest of the New World. It often feels as if we are shouting from the sidelines, ignored by the real players in the game.

Not only are we distant from the nation's political centre, but from its economic headquarters as well. Vancouver has few major head offices, which tend to scoop up the brightest and most innovative. "A lot of the really smart executives, even ones who want to live in Vancouver, can't find opportunities here," says Roslyn Kunin, an economist and former chair of the Vancouver Stock Exchange. Head offices not only attract the big thinkers in the business world, she adds, they also fund local cultural events, arts organizations and think-tanks.

"Vancouver is never going to be a corporate, head-office city the way Toronto or Calgary are," says David Mitchell of the University of Ottawa. "We're never going to become a centre for corporate culture, but we could become a centre for civil culture."

Mitchell warns that our distance from the centres of power—both economic and political—can lead to a "protest culture" that discourages intellectualism.But the periphery can also be a fruitful place for intellectual activity. Risks can be taken that would be discouraged in the corridors of power.

"It's easier to challenge received wisdom here," says Joel Bakan, a law professor at UBC who recently co-produced *The Corporation*, a documentary based on his book of the same name. "If I was still living in Toronto, I'm not sure I would have felt I could pull back from a traditional academic role in order to write the book and make the film. I would have felt a lot more pressure to stay with the pack."

Michael Walker, who's directed the Fraser Institute since it began in 1974, says that the think-tank would have been much less successful if it had started in Ontario. "We would have been much more subject to pressure to conform," he says. "During our early period, we were advancing a point of view that was rejected out of hand by the centres of power. So we were much better served in our analytic ability by being out here on the periphery, where we could see the rot in the core."

Pretty Young

William Gibson has a reputation for seeing the futures of cities. The author of speculative fiction like *Neuromancer* and, most recently, *Pattern Recognition*, likes to walk the streets, squint his eyes and imagine what dark paths a city might take. "When I go to New York or Paris, I'm always slightly hallucinating what it will be like in 50 years," he says. But when he turns this vision on Vancouver, his home for the last two decades, he finds himself somewhat baffled.

"Vancouver today would be fabulously unrecognizable to the people who lived here in 1942, or even 20 years ago," he says. "We didn't become a real city until the 21st century had almost begun. I don't know any other place that's changed as much, or changed as well. I still have no idea where it's going."

What about the city's intellectual climate?

"This is an interesting city at a very interesting time," says Gibson. "Vancouver is in its late adolescence now. On the one hand it feels like nothing's going on, and other times it feels like there's fantastic potential."

This idea that Vancouver is in its adolescence might explain why people interviewed for this article often wanted to talk about the city's future. Their general consensus: Vancouver is destined for greatness, and a vibrant intellectual climate will be one part of it.

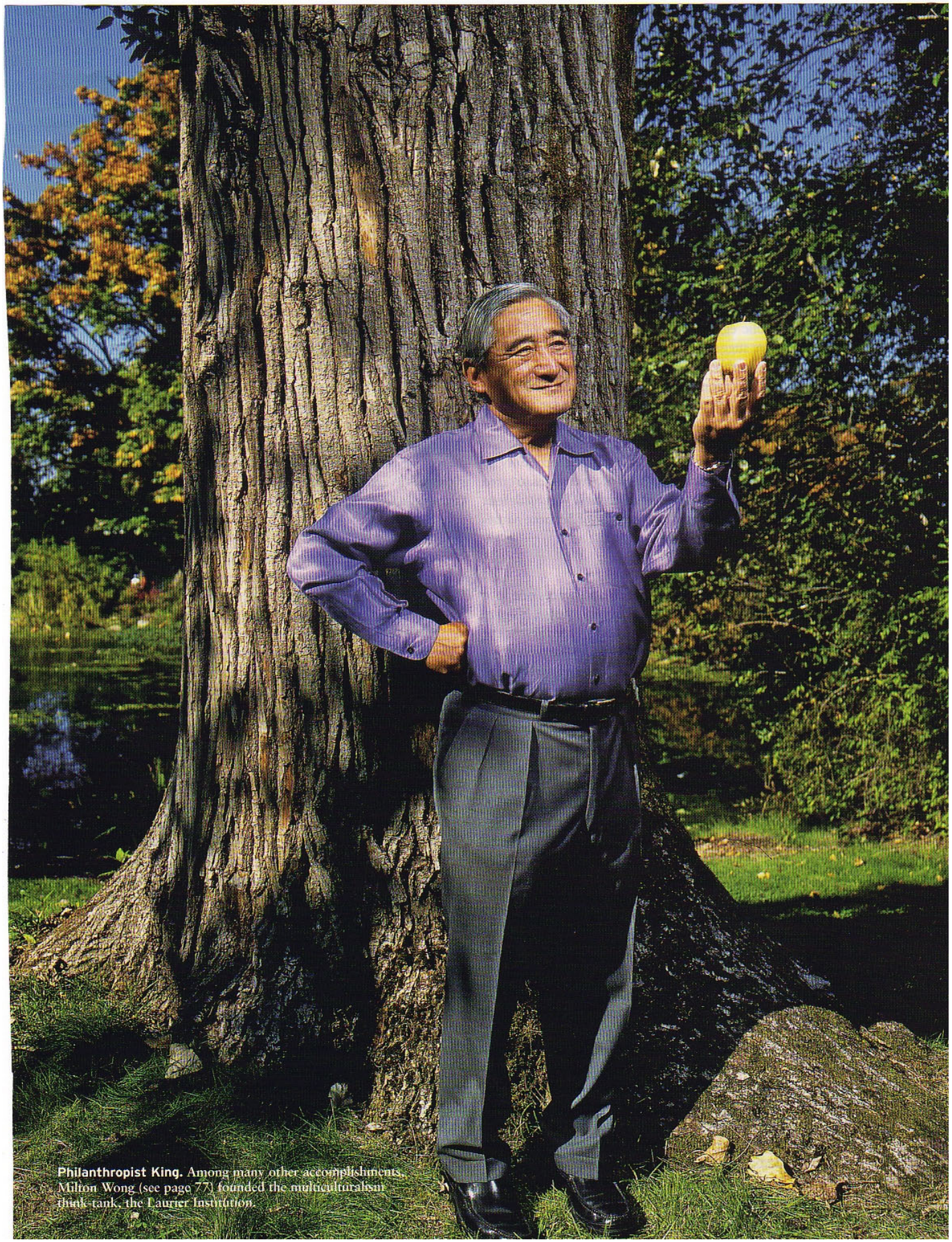
To get there, we need more forums—and a more thoughtful local media—to stir the intellectual pot in Vancouver and introduce us to the best ideas of our fellow citizens.

But, like any adolescent, we also need to get more comfortable in our own skins. We need to realize that the ocean and forest-clad mountains don't necessarily distract us, but they do influence our thoughts. (And so do the Yaohan Centre in Richmond, the Sikh temples of Surrey and the Downtown Eastside.) And if we become a head-office town,

The idea that the city is in its adolescence might explain why so many people want to talk about its future.

it will be for smaller, more agile companies, rather than banks and petroleum giants. We will always be on the periphery, distant from the wheels of power in Central Canada, but that can make us more daring when we assert our culture and ideas on the national and international stages.

Vancouver is never going to be the school president or the straight-A student at the front of the class. But we might be the good-looking,



Philanthropist King. Among many other accomplishments, Milton Wong (see page 77) founded the multiculturalism think-tank, the Laurier Institution.

slightly spacy, creative—even rebellious—kid. The one daydreaming or making smart-ass comments from the back row. In other words, the one that the conventional kids always secretly wished they could be.

Rebel Brains:

Vancouver's Renegade Intellectuals

Who are Vancouver's public brains? To identify them, we interviewed several dozen of our city's more thoughtful citizens. Three generalizations can be drawn from their comments. First, our city doesn't have a well-recognized canon of public eggheads—with the exception of David Suzuki, few names were suggested regularly. Second, few Vancouver women were described as public intellectuals, although many were credited with behind-the-scenes promotion of intellectual discourse in the city. And third, our most influential public intellectuals tend to be rebels. They take a counter-mainstream view and challenge the public to see things their way. From Suzuki's radical green vision to Michael Walker's battle against government meddling in the economy to Kalle Lasn's guerrilla war on corporate power, Vancouver seems to breed renegade brains rather than establishment intellectuals. We profile four leading brains and provide a surely incomplete list of 20 more names to keep in mind.

Michael Byers

Michael Byers leans forward in his office chair and braces one foot against a bookshelf stacked with law texts. His body is tense, his gaze unfocussed, his attention rivetted to the telephone. From across the room I can hear a muffled chirruping from the phone's earpiece: Piya Chattopadhyay, host of *B.C. Almanac* on CBC Radio, is welcoming Byers on air. "Good afternoon," he replies, "it's good to be here."

Just over an hour ago, a producer phoned to see if Byers had any insight into the recent American decision to boost surveillance of the British Columbia border. Now Byers is live to thousands of listeners. In his allotted five minutes, he points out the common American misperception that some September 11 terrorists sneaked across the border from Canada. He suggests that the deployment is part of a campaign strategy to make President George W. Bush appear tough on homeland security. And he gets in a jab at conservative pundits in the U.S. who try to stigmatize Vancouver as "Vansterdam." Then, with a curt thanks from Chattopadhyay, he is dismissed.

Byers puts down the phone and pauses a moment to decompress. "It's better than TV," he says with a wry grin. "If they give you 30 seconds, you're lucky."

This July Byers left North Carolina, where he was a law professor at Duke University, to become the academic director of the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. He also took on UBC's Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law.

But these are just his official titles. Like a superhero who keeps his costume handy in case of orphanage fires or rampaging villains, Byers is ready to tear off his ingrained academic reticence whenever the public needs him. And he's got a full dance card. This summer he warned Premier Gordon Campbell that a premature sale of "coal-bed gas" exploration rights in southeastern B.C. would break international law, he cautioned the Canadian government against joining the American missile defence, and he has repeatedly accused George W. Bush's administration of violating the Geneva Conventions on war conduct. Byers champions these positions on the pages of the *Globe and Mail*, *Time* magazine and the high-brow *London Review of Books*, as well as in interviews on radio and TV. While editors and producers are receptive, his views are not universally applauded. "I have written things ...that have generated literally thousands of unpleasant emails," he says. "But I've developed something of a thick skin."

The hectic cut-and-thrust of politics seems a long way from Byers' new corner office on the third floor of the Liu Institute. Towering cedar and maple trees grow beside the building, giving his office the cool, green-tinged feel of a tree fort. Byers himself, a 38-year-old Saskatchewan native who is dressed in chinos and a blue-checked shirt, looks more like an earnest graduate student than a political rabble-rouser. So why does he do it?

"My field—international law and politics—happens to be on the front page of the newspapers every day," he says. "I really think these are issues that people need to take seriously. If we get it wrong— on issues like climate change or nuclear stockpiles in the former USSR —the consequences will be incredibly severe.

"Canada has an important role to play in international politics in the coming years," he adds, "and there's more room for creative thinking here, in Vancouver, than if I was a part of the foreign policy establishment in Ontario and Quebec."

David Suzuki

Step through the door of the David Suzuki Foundation and, for a moment, it appears as if you have entered the lair of a TV evangelist. The preacher's name graces the spines of glossy texts, his wise words appear on monthly bulletins, and his crinkle-eyed smile beams from pamphlets and a wall-mounted ceramic bust.

There are few Canadian mugs as recognizable as Suzuki's: the steel-wool goatee, the laughing eyes behind thick glasses, the pleasing combination of wisdom and mischief. But he is not just a pretty face. In our hunt for Vancouver's public intellectuals, no name came up more often than Suzuki's.

When you meet him in person, there is one obvious difference between real life and his persona on *The Nature of Things*. The man swears like a sailor.

"A public intellectual?" Suzuki muses. "Shit, that word 'intellectual' is a weird thing."

It's true that today he does not look like a man prone to overthinking. He appears to have spent his summer out in the sun and the salty breeze, like an old surf bum or a tugboat skipper who has slipped on a pair of sandals and a plum T-shirt and wandered up here from the beach. In short, Suzuki looks good for 68.

The story of Suzuki's conversion from researcher to activist is a classic in the environmental movement. After a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, he came to UBC and established the country's largest genetics research laboratory. He soon won recognition as one of Canada's top research scientists under 35.

Despite his success, Suzuki became skeptical of the supposed neutrality and objectivity of scientists. He realized that geneticists of the early 20th century—who believed that we can and should control human evolution—had contributed to the Holocaust, to forced sterilization of the mentally ill and to the war-time internment of Japanese-Canadians, including Suzuki's own family.

He found himself in a bind. While our powers of genetic manipulation were increasing—in small part due to his own research—there was scant debate about ethics or public safety.

By the mid-1970s Suzuki had shifted his emphasis from research to

hosting CBC science programs, which he used as a platform to argue for the preservation of endangered species and ecosystems. "I've never denied being an advocate," he says in response to people who accuse him of being an activist rather than a thinker. "The problem with a lot of academics is that they're great at talking, but when it comes to laying their bodies on the line they do fuck-all."

Suzuki decided that the best way to save the world was to educate his viewers, who'd then launch their own campaigns. "In fact," he says, "the complete opposite happened. What I didn't realize is that TV is such an ephemeral thing: by and large people don't remember anything from week to week. But one constant is that they saw me over and over again. So the public, by viewing my shows and having faith in my credibility, gave me a constituency. Now if I call up Paul Martin, he's not thinking, Oh, there's that one guy. He's thinking, There's that guy with 1.5 million viewers. So they've empowered me, which is exactly the opposite of what I wanted."

When Suzuki and his wife, Tara Cullis, created an organization to research and promote ecological sustainability, they planned to call it the Pender Foundation. But a fundraising specialist told him to call it the David Suzuki Foundation. "I said no at first," Suzuki says. "For starters, it seemed incredibly egotistical. Second, if my name is on it, I'll have to keep involved."

His involvement with the foundation, and the continued use of his face as a trademark of the environmental movement, makes retirement difficult. "I'm almost 70, and I've got a lot of things I want to do in this last part of my life," he says.

What would "real retirement" mean for Suzuki?

"I want to learn Spanish," he says without hesitation. "And take a course in geology."

Michael Walker

The boos start as soon as Walker's face appears on the screen. He is one of few dissenting voices in *The Corporation*, a documentary that portrays corporations as psychopathic entities. But the audience at Vancouver's Ridge Theatre immediately recognizes the executive director of the Fraser Institute, and they respond as if he were a cheatin' husband brought on-stage during *The Jerry Springer Show*. Before this mild-looking economist has uttered a word, the Ridge crowd is against him.

When I describe the incident to Walker several months later, he's unsurprised. "The reason people get upset is because a lot of our ideas challenge comfortable opinions," he says. "Why else would anybody boo a person who spends all his time doing ideas?"

The Fraser Institute occupies the fourth floor of a charmless, concrete bunker near the Molson Brewery on Burrard Street. Walker's own office is quite comfortable, with stuffed bookshelves and framed memorabilia, including a road sign whose directions would appeal to any conservative: "Heaven: turn right and then go straight."

Walker, who is 59, wears a banker's blue shirt. He also wears one of the products from the Fraser Institute's catalogue: a navy tie dotted with images of Adam Smith, the intellectual father of liberal economics. Walker himself is a leading disciple of a school of economics known as neo-liberalism, which argues that free trade and unfettered markets are the path to national prosperity.

Back in 1974, Walker says, British Columbia was dangerously ignor-

ing this free market ethos. "By nationalizing industries, by regulation, by ill-considered taxation, the government caused a lot of destruction to this province," he argues. He was worried the whole country was slipping in this direction, and so he came to Vancouver to fight the ideas of the misguided New Democrat government.

"You could say that [Premier] Dave Barrett—although he would not want to take credit for this—determined that the Fraser Institute would be here in British Columbia."

Over the last 30 years the Fraser Institute's advice has been taken to heart by politicians ranging from Britain's Margaret Thatcher, to Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Klaus, to Canadian conservatives like Preston Manning and former Ontario premier Mike Harris.

The neo-liberal triumph has not pleased everyone, of course. "When we were first in business in Vancouver there were regular demonstrations in front of the building," says Walker, who tends to express emotion with his brow raised in surprise or furrowed in disapproval. "In 1978 a fire bomb was sent up the elevator. In the early 1980s I had death threats and the police maintained surveillance of my home." A few boos in a movie theatre, by comparison, seem almost friendly.

In Walker's view, the Fraser Institute does not propound one of several viable economic theories; it educates people about the theory that works best. "Our work at the institute has been to show the unintended consequences of well-meaning people who pursue bad ideas," he says.

This allegation frustrates Seth Klein, who directs the Fraser Institute's intellectual sparring partner, the B.C. branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. "The Fraser Institute likes to pretend there is an objective way to determine the choices that will best benefit the national interest," says Klein. "Our point is that public policies always have winners and losers, which means you can't escape questions of social and ethical values. It's not true that governments have no choice but to cut taxes for the wealthiest, to lower welfare, or reduce environmental standards, all in order to remain competitive. Public policy is always about choices."

But Klein admits that it's difficult to convince governments to ignore the ideas championed by the Fraser Institute.

Walker is pleased to have gone from a "right-wing radical" to someone whose recommendations have become conventional wisdom. "What we did, and what any think-tank needs to do if it wants to affect public policy, is we changed what people think is acceptable," he says. "And you do that by informing them."

Although he hasn't seen *The Corporation*, he's heard from friends that it's "a piece of trash." But it still offers a chance to get the Fraser Institute message out. "At least they got our name right," says Walker. "So maybe after the film people will say, 'What was that idiot talking about?' and then sign onto our website."

Even if they aren't convinced by the institute's articles, they still might buy an Adam Smith tie.

Kalle Lasn

"Perhaps because of the city's lack of distinct corporate entities," Douglas Coupland wrote in *City of Glass*, Vancouver is "a wellspring of dissent against the forces of bland global corporate nothingness."

If that dissent has an official journal, it is *Adbusters* magazine. For the last 15 years the magazine has catalogued the sins of multinational

corporations and promoted anti-consumerist acts like defacing billboards or participating in an annual "TV Turnoff Week."

"Civil society versus corporate power is the central paradigm in the planetary endgame we are now facing," says Kalle Lasn, *Adbusters* founder, when I meet him at the magazine's headquarters—a rambling, five-storey house in South False Creek.

Lasn, 62, comes across as an angry and uncompromising social critic in his writings, but in person he is remarkably affable. He has a tall forehead, a fringe of white hair and a collared shirt with pushed-up sleeves—from the waist up he looks like a comfortably tenured, left-leaning professor. But he also wears grey shorts and New Balance running shoes, as if ready to take to the streets at any moment.

Lasn was born in Estonia, but his family was uprooted during the Second World War. After a time in displaced-person camps they sailed for Australia. "I've always been a little angry," he says. "My personality formed in Australia at a time when people who came from Europe like me were seen as "new Australians." I know what it's like to be discriminated against, to be looked at as deficient in some way.

"So I was a guy who early on was picking holes in mainstream society and finding ways to say my piece. Whatever you want to call that —a disturbing inferiority complex, maybe—it's stayed with me. I live for confronting mainstream society. I enjoy it."

Lasn is happy to discuss economic theories or French Situationists, but he sees himself as a provocateur rather than a public intellectual. For Lasn, a good idea usually culminates in a global campaign.

In 1993 the magazine started an annual "Buy Nothing Day," which is now celebrated with anti-consumerist demonstrations in dozens of cities around the world. This year Lasn launched a lawsuit against Canada's major television networks, alleging that their refusal to air *Adbusters*' anti-consumption commercials is a violation of his right to free speech. The lawsuit, headed by prominent Toronto lawyer Clayton Ruby, also names the Canadian government as a deficient regulator of the airwaves.

In the spring, Lasn was roundly criticized for an *Adbusters* article that put black dots beside the names of Jews in a list of prominent American neo-conservatives. Critics saw an unpleasant parallel to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jewish cabals that manipulate the media and world governments. But Lasn points out that the Christian influence on the Bush administration is frequently analyzed. Given the importance of America's policy toward Israel, he argues, why can't we look at Jewish ethnicity of many Bush advisors? "I was naïve in thinking this debate would be like the others," he says, admitting that the article cost him some subscribers.

But Lasn thinks that *Adbusters*' riskiest campaign of all is a new line of shoes.

"A lot of academic theses have been written about culture-jamming," Lasn says, "and one criticism is that by the mere act of always being in opposition, we are destined to fail. What we have to do is find a new way of doing business."

One option, Lasn decided, was to attempt an act of business jujitsu. He took a corporate target—Nike—and designed a competing product: the Blackspot Sneaker. The shoe is a Converse lookalike with a blank spot instead of Nike's trademark swoosh. (Nike recently bought the Converse brand.) It will be made in a non-sweatshop factory, and any profits will be rolled into other *Adbusters* anti-corporate campaigns. The Blackspot Sneaker, named one of *New York Times Magazine*'s Best Ideas of 2003, has just started to roll off a Portuguese production line.

"Some ideas work, some don't," he says. But, he adds, "there's a certain flakiness to Vancouver that allows people to try out crazy new things without being squashed."

Vancouver's Other Public Intellectuals

Douglas Coupland. Author. Better than anyone else, Coupland analyzes the physical texture and psychic hum of contemporary Canada. He uses zeitgeist as his clay, shaping it into novels, picture, books, art installations and, most recently, the play *September 10, 2001*.

Milton Wong. Philanthropist, chancellor of SFU, chairman of HSBC Asset Management Canada Ltd. Even if you haven't heard Wong speak, you've likely enjoyed the fruits of his ideas. A believer in strength through diversity, he started the Dragon Boat Festival and launched the Laurier Institution, a think-tank concerned with multiculturalism. To invigorate science in the city, he helped found Science World and led a campaign that raised $100 million for cancer research. Next on his list: interfaith dialogue and sustainable development.

Thomas Berger. Legal Activist. In his 40 years as a public figure in B.C., Berger has pursued ideas along a conventional career path. He briefly led the provincial NDP, then became one of the youngest judges to sit on the B.C. Supreme Court. His full-throated advocacy for aboriginal rights in the Canadian constitution led to his resignation in 1982. Since then he has written books and taken high-profile roles, such as legal counsel for the Nisga'a nation. He now leads Vancouver city counsel's commission to redesign the municipal electoral system.

Marjorie Griffin Cohen. Professor of political science, SFU. In 1994, tired of having the Fraser Institute monopolize policy debates in the province, Cohen helped found the B.C. branch of the left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. She's a stalwart critic of the B.C. Liberals' policies on privatization, poverty and labour negotiations. Asked why few other women are prominent public intellectuals, Cohen says there are a lot of "unsung Amazons" in the city; they're just not publicity-seekers.

Max Wyman. Author, arts critic. After decades as a godfather of the local arts scene—and arts critic for the *Vancouver Sun*—Wyman recently put his convictions on the line in *The Defiant Imagination: Why Culture Matters*. He is the president of Canada's Commission to UNESCO and a key player behind a global initiative to protect cultural diversity.

Joel Bakan. Professor of law, UBC. Bakan made a conscious decision to become a public intellectual when he co-produced *The Corporation*, an award-winning documentary based on his book-length critique of corporate power and behavior. He is now represented by the same public speaking agency as Michael Moore. If Moore's fee is too high for a client, Bakan jokes, the agency says, "Well you can get this Canadian guy for a lot cheaper."

Gordon Gibson. Writer and senior fellow at the Fraser Institute. Gibson, who once led the B.C. Liberal party, is a frequent critic of the political scene for the *Vancouver Sun* and the *National Post*. A staunch believer that the democratic system can be improved, he helped design

the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform.

Daniel Pauly. UBC professor and director of the Fisheries Centre. Pauly's research into the depletion of fisheries around the world convinced him that, without urgent action, our only "seafood" dishes will be sea cucumbers, jellyfish and plankton. Last year, *Scientific American* magazine named him one of the 50 most influential research scientists in the world.

Judith Marcuse. Dancer, choreographer, instructor. Founder and artistic producer of DanceArts Vancouver, Marcuse combines dance with social activism and intellectual inquiry. Since 1995 she has created a series of ambitious multimedia productions, including *FIRE: Where There's Smoke* and *The Earth Project*. She lectures on art and social change at SFU's Centre for Dialogue.

Right Reverend Michael Ingham. Bishop of the New Westminster Diocese, Anglican Church of Canada. Ingham, who created a storm of controversy over his decision to bless same-sex partnerships, is a daring thinker on issues of church reform and multifaith understanding. Just ask the Dalai Lama.

Mark Wexler. Professor of business, SFU.

Political Prof. UBC's Marjorie Griffin Cohen.

Wexler specializes in corporate responsibility, but as an applied ethicist and public commentator he tackles everything from whistleblower protection to police tribunals to religious tolerance.

John MacDonald. Entrepreneur. MacDonald co-founded MacDonald Dettwiler and Associates, arguably Vancouver's most successful home-grown high-tech company. Credited with one of the city's most innovative business minds, he is an energetic public booster of the city's high-tech sector.

Mark Winston. Professor of biological sciences, SFU. One of Vancouver's most prolific commentators on science, Winston has written books on genetically modified foods, pesticides and killer bees. He is, in fact, a part-time bee wrangler, who has coordinated "stunt swarms" for TV shows like *Smallville* and *The X-Files*.

William Gibson. Author. Gibson has given us dispatches from possible futures in novels that range from cyberpunk classics like *Neuromancer* and *All Tomorrow's Parties* to the alternate present of *Pattern Recognition*. That doesn't make him a public intellectual, argues Gibson, who sees himself more "as a watered-down version of William Blake, who walks down Robson Street conversing with angels that no one can see and goes home and makes crayon drawings of them."

Roslyn Kunin. Economist. Kunin has been a perennial influence on ideas about economic and social policy throughout her stints as chair of the Vancouver Stock Exchange, governor of UBC, director of the Laurier Institution, financial columnist for the *Province*

and now, a director of the Business Development Bank of Canada.

Neil Boyd. Professor of criminology, SFU. A new release from Boyd always provokes debate, whether he is revealing violence toward long-term-care patients or the flaws in the war on drugs. This year he aggravated women's studies departments across the country with *Big Sister: How Extreme Feminism Has Betrayed the Fight for Sexual Equality*.

Bill Rees. Director of the School for Community and Regional Planning, UBC. To measure the "ecological footprint" of a person or community requires elaborate calculations, but the concept, which was invented by Rees, is devastating in its clarity. A recent report from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities said that if everyone in the entire world consumed resources at the Canadian rate, four additional Earths would be needed to support them.

Bing Thom. Principal, Bing Thom Architects. Thom is a well-regarded lecturer on architecture and Vancouver's urban development, but he expresses his ideas most eloquently in his buildings. At Surrey Central City he plunged a graceful glass and wood office tower through a pre-existing mall, creating an office-university-retail complex that was crowned "best real estate development in the world" this spring.

Douglas Todd. Journalist, *Vancouver Sun*. Arguably Vancouver's most thoughtful journalist, Todd believes—and convinces his readers—that this city is a hotbed of innovation in religion, spirituality and ethics.

Kathleen Bartels. Director, Vancouver Art Gallery. Bartels arrived in 2001 to shake things up. With the success of *Massive Change*, the Bruce Mau-curated smorgasbord of new ideas in design, Bartels proves that the VAG can be an idea factory as well as a picture gallery.

John Stackhouse. Professor of theology and culture, UBC. A prolific and high-profile author and editorialist, Stackhouse examines the intersection of faith, religious institutions and contemporary culture and politics.

Yosef Wosk. Director of the interdisciplinary programs, SFU. Wosk, the founder of the Philosopher's Café and a driving force behind SFU's Centre for Dialogue, cultivates Vancouver's intellectual discourse like a diligent gardener. The ideal intellectual discussion, he says, is a hybrid of high and low culture, of profundity and pragmatism, and—whenever possible—fine dining.

This Month

It's long been a lazy cliché that the Left Coast is the shallow coast, populated by cultists, pot-smokers, ex-Socreds and rock-climbing yoga enthusiasts with ripped abs and under-utilized brains. Well, yes, those people are definitely too much with us—but, as writer Chris Tenove found in "Are We Too Pretty To Be Smart?" (page 66), we do have a thriving intellectual tradition, and one that is very specific to our city.

Tenove, who is originally from Edmonton, has lived in this city for seven years. "I loved doing this story" he says, "because it gave me an excuse to call up many of the smartest people in Vancouver."

The piece developed from the conversations he had with all these brainiacs. "Originally this was just going to be a list of public intellectuals, but everybody wanted to talk about Vancouver, and so the story became much more about the city than I had expected."

"Most of the interviews started with an argument over what a public intellectual is," he says. "My definition came to be someone who is a champion or critic of ideas in the public sphere—somebody who engages the mainstream—and isn't just talking to a field of specialists or a niche group. I did find one overall tendency: UBC profs always nominate other UBC profs, and SFU profs always nominate other SFU profs."

Does he feel he's learned more about the place he now lives in? "I'm more swept up in the energy of the city than before, after seeing how much is actually going on here. Vancouverites are nearly Maoist in their love of self-criticism, and I liked seeing another aspect of the place."

While shaping the story we wanted to be as inclusive as possible. Still, you'll notice that Tenove's piece is dominated by—gasp!—older middle-aged white men. This, he found, was unavoidable, without distorting current realities. "Women are increasingly well-represented in the intellectual community—especially younger women—but still, most of the *éminence grise* types tend to be men who entered the field 40 years ago, when gender imbalance was much more marked."

As for any arguments that women were by nature not inclined to become public intellectuals—whether from inherent limitations or an excess of modesty—Tenove isn't buying that argument, and neither am I. There are practical reasons why women are not more prominent: "Being a public intellectual is something you do in addition to your day job, and I don't think women, because of domestic economics, have as many free evenings and weekends."

As for the preponderance of white faces, most of the same reasons apply, with an added cultural twist. "Larry Campbell told me, in the Asian community 'A lot of people are like lights shining inside a paper lantern. You do things quietly. People don't admire bravado.'"

Anything else that Tenove learned while writing the piece? "As part of the research I actually wrote some of the story sitting on Kits Beach, just to see if you can combine deep thoughts with great scenery. I learned two things: that I could not stop worrying that sand grains were going to leap into my hard drive, and that about five percent of people evidently really hate you for working on a laptop at the beach."

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