

THE PROVINCES



ROBERT SHEPPARD

The spice of life, and of columns

AT various times at The Globe and Mail, certain editors have attempted to establish their authority by banning the use of what they feel to be "overused" words.

"Various," in my case, has been one of them, a word much hated by the man who edits this column, David Lancashire, who has at various times in his career been a hotel clerk, a jazz trombonist, a war correspondent in the Middle East and the chief features writer at The Globe; and who has employed this workmanlike term with the parsimony of someone measuring out his best Scotch.

In seven years of feature-writing at the Globe, Mr. Lancashire resorted to "various" on only 11 occasions, which compares with the 642 articles I have written since 1979 that contain the word, 193 of them since Mr. Lancashire took up editing this column five years ago — each of them hard fought over.

This is evidence of the kind of unwarranted tension that we newspaper writers must submit to during the editing process, often by the kind of people who feel the Ten Commandments can be safely whittled down to three. It is probably also unfair to the word "various," a favourite of the poet Dryden if not of Shakespeare, though admittedly not as vivacious as its sister element "variety" (the "very spice of life," the "soul of pleasure").

There are some places, I admit, where "various" does not fit. We dare not call Quebec "a various society," though if we were to, it might add to our understanding of the place. But as a technique, appreciating variousness is an invaluable way for columnists to knit together the, uh, multifarious skeins of otherwise disaggregated observations.

For instance, The Big Trade. If truth be told, the surprising trade of Toronto Maple Leafs captain Wendell Clark to the Quebec Nordiques is not merely the handiwork of a short-sighted, avaricious, blockheaded Leafs management. It is better seen as part of a secret, desperate bid to keep the country together.

If by this time next year, when Quebecers are readying themselves to vote in a referendum, Wendell is not bashing and scoring his way into the hearts and minds of his new fans, demonstrating the raw glory that is Kelvington, Saskatchewan (another distinct society), there is no hope for us as a nation. He has no idea of the great weight being placed on his 27-year-old shoulders.

In the same vein, I see that **Joni Mitchell** will perform at the Edmonton Folk Festival this summer, one of a very few live appearances she has made in the past five years.

Is **Joni Mitchell** really 50 years old? God, where does the time go? I can recall her — what, 20 years ago now, anyway — at an outdoor concert in Montreal, late at night, two hours after a thunderstorm had delayed the start, when the crowd just wouldn't go home. It was the beginning of her jazz phase, the busy bass rhythms of Charlie Mingus's influence coupled with a new, rambunctious horn section. Her long hair flew straight out to one side like a flag snapping in the wind. Edmonton has had a rough go lately; it deserves no less.

THE world is truly a varied place. The rival Toronto Star has a new boss: the guy who has been running the paper's book-selling side, Harlequin Romances. That makes him the second big newspaper publisher to come up through the Harlequin ranks. We had the first, Roy Megarry, who ran The Globe for nearly 14 years, and now we have an American, who is said to be a decent fellow and who comes to the paper as the last of the old-time writers and editors are taking their leave, my editor among them. Part of a (mostly) genteel corporate buyout, their various departures will nonetheless change this newspaper in a variety of subtle ways that even those of us who write for a living can't seem to find the right words for.

One woman was not even out of the building yesterday when the various office scavengers — including one very senior editor — came along to claim her chair and other desk-top accoutrements as if the occasion were a lawn sale. It's how we mask our pain.

As for Mr. Lancashire, after a long and wistful lunch, he appears to have somehow escaped editing this column one last time. But I will always have his various admonitions ringing in my ears.