

TV commercials: the selling of Bill and Dave

by Canadian Press
VANCOUVER — Premier Bill Bennett warns workers to be wary of the big orange machine of the New Democratic Party in the May 5 British Columbia election campaign.

And NDP Leader Dave Barrett reminds voters that he's fighting big money and a slick organization imported from Ontario when he takes on the Social Credit party.

But when it comes to the parties' election advertising, that high-powered political machinery seems as unsophisticated as a child's wind-up toy in the eyes of a Simon Fraser University professor.

Gary Mauser, who has studied political marketing, says the Socreds and NDP television commercials are far behind the quality of advertising of corporations marketing a new product.

"The local politicians aren't rubes, but they aren't far from it," says Mauser, a business administration instructor and past president of the Canadian Association for Applied Social Research.

Mauser says the commercials point out the need for better marketing, polling and interpreting techniques. One television ad, a Socred pot-shot at socialist Barrett, shows a fat man struggling into a business suit. An NDP message features an exploding bottle of expensive wine to remind voters of a former cabinet minister's lavish meals and expense-account living.

A great deal of techni-

cal expertise has gone into the Social Credit ads and the intent is clear, but their execution is flawed, says Mauser.

He points to a Socred ad that shows a carpenter sawing pieces off a plank. The background voice says why the NDP is bad for business while uneven pieces of wood fall into a pile of sawdust on the floor.

"That commercial lacks punch," says Mauser. "The visuals should back up the content of the voice over. In that commercial the two have no connection."

To be effective, says Mauser, a commercial's message must be grasped easily even by illiterates, but have enough depth not to bore frequent viewers.

A tall order, he says, but possible with the right market research and intelligent interpretation of opinion polls.

The Socreds have hired some high-powered pollsters, he says, but they lack the expertise to use properly the advice they get.

Steve Vrlak, who organized the Socred central media campaign, estimates its cost at \$750,000. He says ideas are arrived at by committee and produced by a variety of people. Vrlak and his agency, Vrlak Robinson Advertising, screen the final product.

Soren Bech, NDP campaign co-ordinator, says the party is spending \$450,000 on its campaign. Bech wrote most of the commercials himself and used a local

agency, Griffiths Gibson Productions.

Both say there is heavy emphasis on television advertising, with decreasing weight on radio, print and leaflet campaigns.

Mauser says the NDP are better at execution than the Socreds, although their commercials might appear slightly less polished.

He points to an ad of a type he calls "Pepsi generation." It flashes on a number of smiling people who are busy working at a variety of jobs. In the background, a chorus is singing: "You and me and the NDP."

The commercial doesn't delve into party

policy or discuss any election issues, but Mauser says that's not the purpose of a 30-second television spot. It is supposed to create a mood, define an issue or stimulate interest.

Bech says policy is barely touched in the NDP television ads. Instead, the party printed 750,000 brochures which outline the central platform.

Free-time appearances on the CBC are an

exception, because their length allows more discussion of issues. The Socreds have eight of these 15-minute spots, the NDP six, and the Liberals one.

Free ads on CBC radio are divided in similar proportions.

As for the rash of negative commercials both parties produced early in the campaign (most have now been replaced with more positive messages), Mauser says they

are fair game in an election.

In the current political atmosphere where there is a large number of undecided voters and voters who are dissatisfied with the party in power, it's good strategy for the NDP to point out Socred faults.

At the same time, most people vote on the basis of who they don't want in power, he said.

so the Socreds have something to gain by criticizing the NDP.

Vrlak says negative messages in political commercials have become acceptable. But he adds that the points chosen have to be defensible.

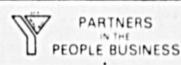
Bech said the NDP ads are not pot-shots, but attacks on the Socreds' record.

He says he's not convinced television ads are

as important in an election campaign as they are made out to be. They reinforce options already held and may sway a small number of people, Bech says.

Mauser says television campaigns are basically preaching to the converted. Their main purpose is to keep up the spirits of party workers and activate latent dispositions.

He says an intense, big-budget advertising campaign might sway five per cent of undecided voters — and five per cent in an election as close as this one is expected to be could make all the difference.



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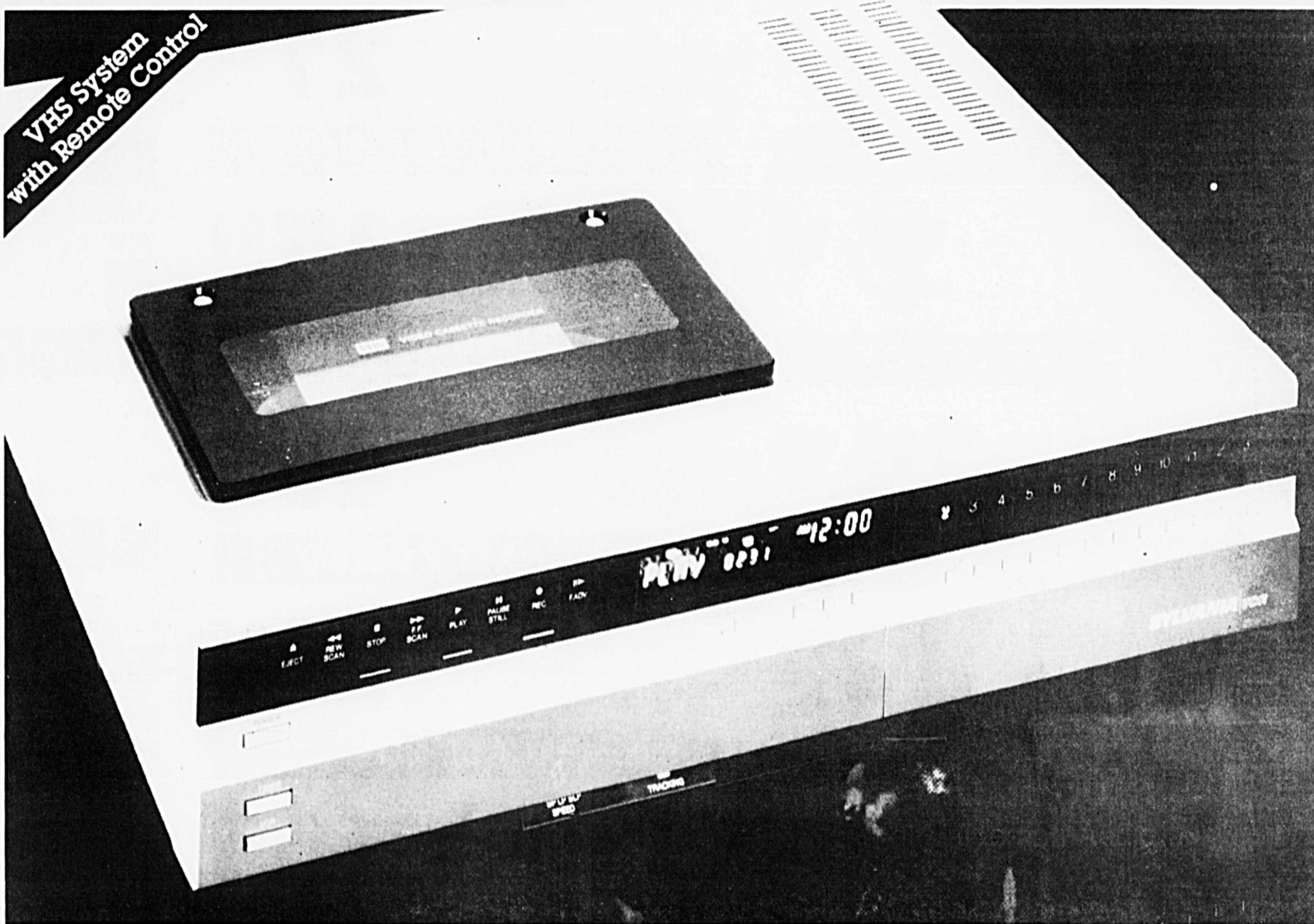
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