
The
Parliamentarian
and the
Press

The following is an edited version of a panel discussion which took place during the Twenty-Seventh Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in Regina in July 1987.



**ARNOLD TUSA
SPEAKER OF THE SASKATCHEWAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
INTRODUCING THE PANEL**

GRANT DEVINE:



Our subject today is the role of the media in the democratic process I am going to comment from my vantage point on what the media does to a leader and, to some extent, what it has done to politics.

Let me start with a couple of quotes. One is from Lawrence J. Peter, a Canadian educator and author of *The Peter Principle*. He said “an ounce of image is worth a pound of performance”.

This humorous truism explains, to a large extent, what we see happening in North American politics and perhaps even the world. The image, and particularly the image of the leaders, is increasingly important often. Weighing this ounce of image against the pound of performance, the image may be more important than performance. Now I am not saying whether that is good or bad and I will have some further comments on that later.

Another quote is from Fred Friendly, professor of Journalism at Columbia University. He said “today’s reporter is forced to become an educator more concerned with explaining the news than being first on the scene”. He also argues that journalists have not only become interpreters rather than observers but often become part and parcel of the story themselves.

I think these two observations are facts of life for parliamentarians. Image clearly is important. The way the media interprets what we do is important. We live in a pretty competitive environment in terms of having to be elected and being judged on our performance on an ongoing basis. I think it is important that we understand how things work in practice.

When we examine the relationship between the politician and those in the media we have to keep in mind that we are dealing with somebody who is going to interpret our performance, judge it and explain it to the public through the eyes of their own biases. Thus it is pretty important that a politician understand, not only the media in a generic sense, but the media in an individual sense, in a personal sense. This raises the question of how intimate a relationship should you have with the person who’s going to be telling your story or their version of your story. It raises further questions about the point at which you sacrifice your principles saying, “Well I’ll give him a pat on the back because he is a good old boy and I’d better not antagonize him”. The other words “how far do I go before I back away from my principles?”

In my own case, before I was elected, I was known as the invisible man. That is what they called me. When I was running around campaigning and trying to get somebody’s attention because I was invisible. So even when I knocked on your door, you didn’t see me because I was not there according to people who were.

After you are elected, then obviously you become visible but they do not want to see you either. Because you may be looking at it saying well I’m not so sure everybody would do that in agriculture and do this in trade or some other things. Well I could comment more about that perhaps a little bit later but I would say that in terms of the relationship between leaders and politicians and the media, it’s something that will be studied more and more and I just want to quote a few observations that I believe are relevant.

One piece of research that I’ve looked at is a publication by Comber and Mayne. They make several observations worth noting.

Professionals notice a significant difference between what the media does today and what it used to do. The authors comment “today the news anchorman or anchorwoman plays the role of a genial host who provides a minimal level of continuity as the picture zooms off to the far reaches of the earth to present the up-to-minute developments in the latest catastrophe. The stories are fast-paced and relentless. All the modern techniques available are used to present the illusion that the viewer is right there as the story breaks ... an eye witness to history in the making”. “But we are not seeing history as it happens. The pictures we see have been carefully selected based on such criteria as the amount of action and amount of colour in the individual event. The fast-paced and clipped approach has led to a superficial and sometimes cynical style in political news reporting. The reporter has become a tour guide who shows us the news wonders of the world”.

The change professionals are talking about, both in the teaching and practice of journalism is something we have to be aware of as elected representatives. The concept of news service is changing. Once journalists were taught to never say I. This emphasized that the journalist’s role was to present facts and sometimes other peoples’ opinions but not to insert his own into the news. This was so in the past, today it’s not. Today’s newspapers and television programs, once bastions of impersonal reporting, feature journalists in the forefront of their news stories. They interpret their own story.

“Reporters’ comments, have become the dominant feature of political news reporting. Reporters have access to more air time, more column inches to let us know their opinions than do our elected representatives”. I think this is the key to the whole article. This is the key to the authors’ main contention: reporters have more time to explain what they think is going on than do the people who are making the news. It seems to me clear that the interpretation of a news release by a reporter

is a very powerful influence. The fact that the people who make the news are often not quoted and often not even shown on television but in fact, are interpreted in terms of what they were going to say is something that is increasingly powerful and something that we have to deal with as politicians.

The modern style of journalism is that the personalities and the opinions of individuals should not enter into the story but in fact, they do, hidden as they are behind the facade of objective reporting. Such influences have considerable impact especially in reporting on a political campaign or on policy interpretations.

The authors go on to point out that when opinion and biases are meshed together in a single news item, the reader has no way of recognizing assumptions and political biases of the reporter. Well, what is wrong with that? So what if the reporter has a bias. What if certain assumptions are made that are not shared with the media and shared with the public. What's the downside? The downside is that you might not have the truth. You might not have the facts.

“If we have a democratic process that is not built on facts, then it is built on fiction, on untruths, on misinformation, its built on propaganda”

I am just finishing the book *Modern Times* by Paul Johnson. The propaganda machines of the world's big leaders in the last 100 years are extremely frightening and obviously could not work in a democratic process. If you go back to Lenin, Stalin, Hitler or others you see the need for truths as absolutely essential to safeguard democracy. We all, particularly politicians, are involved in saying well (my side has better ideas" in terms of policy to generate a solution. Others claim they have better ideas. I suspect truth lies in the middle. There is thus tremendous responsibility on political scientists and on the media to seek the truth.

Let me close by saying this. There's no doubt that the role of the media and the relationship with the new technology has a tremendous impact on what politicians are going to do today and in the future. We have to be sensitive about how we manage our campaigns the way we walk, the way we talk and what we do. Whether we are going to ride horseback in a campaign, throw a football, get our luggage lost or do other things, we have to be extremely careful because the power of the media has unquestionably increased.

I do not think we are about to change that, I would only say I believe that recognition of the power of the media is the first step in making sure that we make effective use of technology and the power that's there so that we do not abuse it and it does not distort our democratic process. ■

JEFFREY SIMPSON:



I am always a bit, shall we say, perplexed, in discussing the press because it is a generic word used for purposes of convenience which I understand, but which mask a tremendous number of differences.

Its very hard to make generalizations that stick when you consider the differences between or among radio, television, magazines and newspapers. And it is difficult to make generalizations that stick when you consider that

media or the press involve national organizations, regional organizations and local organizations. But having entered that caveat it can be said that parliamentarians and the press, to use those words, do find themselves in an inescapably symbiotic relationship.

It is theoretically possible for parliaments to meet in secret just as it is possible for the media not to cover anything that happens in parliament. But under those circumstances, neither of us would be discharging our responsibilities to the people whom we serve.

There are two aspects of the relationship between parliamentarians and the media that I would like to address. One is the power of the press to make or break political careers. There are various ways this can be done. The most obvious are those which involve scandals. These can come to light, it seems to me, in several ways and any one of them can "break" a political career.

A politician can make public what he or she has done. This happened, for example, a few years ago when the then Solicitor General stood up in the House of Commons and announced his involvement in the signing of certain papers for procuring an abortion for a woman.

It also happened in this Parliament when Marcel Masse resigned because he was being investigated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for certain election irregularities in his constituency. Secondly, allegations by members can be made in the House and these are covered by parliamentary immunity. The media, provided it accurately reports and reflects what happens in parliamentary exchanges, is also covered by parliamentary immunity.

Thirdly, the press itself through reporting can make allegations and these can be and often are investigated by official institutions. These can be judicial inquiries, ■

parliamentary committees, royal commissions or the police and the courts. And one gets, generally speaking, from such official investigations either a definitive explanation as to what actually happened or the public is left to believe certain events took place and to form certain opinions that can break a political career.

The classic example of all of this, of course, was the Watergate situation in the United States where the press, principally the *Washington Post*, took the story to a certain point and then the story was picked up by and carried to its ultimate political conclusion by Congressional committees, special investigators and indeed by Judge Sirica.

Finally, the press can make allegations and the politician can reply and there is a standoff with no outside adjudicating body, no judicial enquiry, no royal commission or no police investigation. At that point you are into an extremely grey area in which political careers can certainly be broken perhaps because the original story was incorrect but the impression still lingers or because you haven't adequately answered the allegations that have been made against you and, therefore, they are allowed to stick.

Now in the first two of these four examples the press is not the instigator of what happens. The press reports, comments upon what others have initiated. In the second two, the press is a player directly, either by launching an investigation or by reporting certain facts. It is inserting itself very directly in the political process. The most dramatic and sometimes unfair way in which the press can break political careers is the fourth category. The third category – the independent enquiry or the outside investigation – can, in fact, clear the air and the politician of any allegation of wrongdoing. Indeed this has been done in recent years in Canada and elsewhere. And even in the last case – the activities of the politician who happens to get his or her activities reported so that allegations are made – he or she is really the author in some cases of his or her own misfortune.

Now political careers can also be broken in much more subtle ways, by interpretations of men and women in politics that the press may collectively take or indeed reputations can be seriously hurt if not broken. But they can be remade rather quickly. Indeed sometimes the media is accused with justice of forming snap opinions about politicians. Part of the reason for this is that at least in the Canadian context, we have developed a rather curious system whereby we hand the leadership of political parties to men and women who have not had extensive years in public life.

Premier Devine was speaking about his early years when he was the invisible man. Well Grant Devine had not spent, as has happened in Britain, 15 or 20 years in political life before he became the leader of his party. It would have been difficult at the time for people to get a long-term fix on what kind of person Grant Devine was because there was no track

record. Now it's different, he's been in office for x number of years.

If you look at federal politics how many years did Mr. Mulroney have, or Mr. Clark or Trudeau or Mackenzie King or Louis St. Laurent, or Lester Pearson? None of these people had spent a long career in public life before they became the leader of their party. So that it's often difficult for the media to get a fix and the consequence of that is that you can often get a terrific flip-flop where the media takes a certain view of an individual politician and then finds out to its horror a year or two later that they got it somewhat wrong. That, under the pressure of events, this individual isn't the person they thought he was and does not react as they thought he would. You saw this, I suppose most dramatically in the case of Mr. Trudeau.

I had occasion, for something else I'm doing to read the press coverage, or a lot of the press coverage, of Mr. Trudeau's leadership run in 1968. For those of you who could remember it, I assure you it was exceedingly positive and helped to create a momentum which subsequently carried him into office. Yet within 12 to 18 months a revisionist view of Mr. Trudeau was setting in. People were saying, we may have misjudged this man. We may not have got a rounded picture of him. So this is a phenomenon that occurs. But I am, notwithstanding the points that Premier Devine has made, distinctly skeptical of the argument that although we do live in a television age, that politicians' success, that parliamentarians' success or failure can be exclusively or even largely ascribed to their media image except within a limited time frame. Over time, the media image, if divorced from reality or if substantially incomplete, will be corrected partly by the media itself and largely by the innate, intuitive and uncanny ability of voters to size up their leaders. It is my misfortune or at least my obligation to know on a personal basis all of the major polling "experts" in this country. We argue all the time. But they are unanimous on the same point when you ask the following question; what does the public know of their politicians and public, what does the public know about what's going on. They will all tell you ... Allan Gregg, Martin Goldfarb, Michael Adams, Maurice Pinard ... they will all say the public is weak when it comes to the details of issues and sometimes even to the outline of issues. But the public is exceedingly shrewd on the personalities, values and attitudes of the leaders of the political parties. They fairly quickly get a good fix on who these men or women are.

Senator Michael Kirby once told me an interesting anecdote. The Liberals did focus groups asking questions of a small group in an effort to plumb the public's mind. They said tell us what you think of Mr. Trudeau. He said the answers these focus groups gave about Mr. Trudeau and what kind of a man he was were almost identical with the reaction of the people who had worked for years in the closest

proximity with Mr. Trudeau. In other words, the public had an uncanny grasp of the man they were dealing with. It's very difficult therefore, despite all the efforts that politicians pour into image manipulation and creation to fool the public and therefore very difficult over the long-term to turn a politician's image around.

Therefore, I never believed that the reason why Joe Clark or Bob Stanfield lost elections had to do with the fact that they dropped footballs, ate bananas, had a double chin or lost their luggage. These were peripheral factors. It had more to do with what they said or didn't say about the substance of issues. It had more to do with Jerusalem. It had more to do with mortgage and property tax deductibility. It had more to do with budgets, it had more to do with the parties' inability to get an energy policy that united the country.

What does happen between parliamentarians and the press sometimes is that the press judges parliamentarians by what they see of the parliamentarian in Parliament. That begs the question of what the press does see? It does not see very much. It does not see much committee work, it does not see much constituency work, it does not see, in the case of ministers, administrative work, it does not see any caucus or party work. Television, therefore, has probably accentuated the emphasis on the performance aspects of politics. But performance in the sense of the theatrics rather than substance. It has certainly allowed opposition members of parliament to become instant celebrities, by virtue of the shrillness of their attacks as opposed to their consideration of issues and they find themselves praised for their instinct for the jugular rather than for the cut of their minds. The opposition is favoured by television or more precisely by what television chooses to report of parliament and government members of parliament, whatever their political party, are hurt because if they are good, their work generally goes on away from press scrutiny.

So the making and breaking by the press of political careers have these sorts of limitations. But it is important, I think, to situate what is happening in the context of the evolution of the press. This relationship is changing and has changed, at least at the national level for reasons that have to do with the structure of the press. It used to be that there were two middlebrow papers, sometimes three in most of the major centres of Canada. These middlebrow mass circulation papers were partisan. You knew in Ottawa that the *Citizen* was Liberal and the *Journal* was Conservative. You knew in Toronto that the *Telegram* was Conservative and the *Star* was Liberal. You knew in Winnipeg that the *Free Press* was liberal and the *Tribune* was Conservative. You knew in Vancouver that the Liberal organ was the *Sun* and so on across the country. This was the pattern of Canadian journalism from long before Confederation. The press was inextricably tied to political parties and highly partisan.

“It is sometimes argued that there was a golden age of the Canadian media where everything was pure and without bias and what we've got these days is a bunch of opinionated reporters. You just have to think about the press 20 or 30 years ago, let alone 100 years ago to know that there never was such a golden age and that the press now if you talk about bias is less biased in a partisan sense than it has ever been in Canada.”

To condense a long argument: what we have in major centres is the loss of middlebrow papers under the influence of television and shrinking advertising markets. Now one middlebrow paper, the *Globe and Mail* is able to span the country and take in politically alert people across the nation. In the regional markets, what is left is one paper with a monopoly. It wished to expand its circulation as much as it could and therefore could not afford to be blatantly partisan so it became less partisan.

Then coming in later, at the bottom of the markets were tabloids principally for the entertainment value in terms of the presentation of news and comments. So we have gone in a reasonably short space of time from a situation in which most major centres had two partisan middlebrow mass circulation papers to markets which are stratified and not defined on partisan lines. Now what is the significance of that for the press and parliament?

In the days when there were at least partisan organs in most of the major centres, the government of the day could always assume that it would get a favourable hearing in some of the nation's newspapers. Even a government at 23% in the public opinion polls. In the old days, the *Toronto Telegram* the *Montreal Gazette* and other papers would try to buck up the Conservatives. No government has that kind of outlet anymore. The media have adopted, for reasons that partly have to do with the structural changes, a kind of all-pervasive skepticism of all governments whatever their political stripe and whatever the level of government.

That is where, to come to the second point briefly, the editorializing is creeping into news copy. It used to be flagrantly partisan, then it became reasonably partisan. Now the editorializing is creeping in, not from overt partisanship but because of this easily observable, but nonetheless somewhat insidious form of editorializing in the form of analyzing and commenting upon. Television has clearly made newspapers more anxious to comment and put into perspective the daily news since television, I regret to say, is

the principal source of news for the majority of the population in this country and in the United States.

Journalism in this country in comparison to Britain or the United States has always lacked prestige. Journalists generally work for lower salaries than they should. Their working conditions are quite poor. I just had lunch with a good friend of mine from the *Financial Times* of London, where I spent four years. He's just been on a three-month, fully paid sabbatical which is written into his contract. They generally work four days a week, they generally work 32 hours a week. Columnists in the United Kingdom consider themselves very hard done by, if they have to write two a week. Well, few people in Canada under these circumstances have been willing to make journalism a lifelong career. Those who stay in the game tend to tire and become entertainers like Allan Fotheringham or Charlie Lynch or pontificators like Peter Newman. The Blair Frasers, the George Bains the Bruce Hutchinsons are very few in the landscape of Canadian journalism. So you get a tremendous rotation of people covering parliaments and you therefore get very little experience.

In the next campaign, for example, the CBC will assign to the three leaders travelling across the country three very competent journalists, all covering their first election campaign. The same thing happened in 1979. The reporters covering the leaders were all doing their first campaign.

Now, in a theoretical sense, all news presentation can be considered a form of editorializing because in the assembling and ordering of information, you make an active selection and the active selection is a form of judgement and judgement implies bias, if you like. It is inescapable and we are gate keepers for information. But the line, as the Premier has said, is becoming blurred in an age of reporting and analyzing and editorializing. Therefore, my guiding principle has always been, when I was a reporter, and now that I'm reporter and columnist, you've got to try and be fair. That is the last and best bastion for reporters in the modern age. ■

DAVID SMITH:



The relationship between parliamentarians and the press goes back a long way in our history. People such as Joseph Howe, Alexander Mackenzie, Étienne Parent, Francis Hincks, Nicolas Flood Davin and Amor de Cosmos were all journalists who entered politics. This has changed a great deal in English Canada, maybe less so in French Canada when one thinks of

Lévesque and Trudeau and Ryan and their role in the quiet revolution.

I have just completed a biography along with a colleague, Norman Ward, on James G. Gardiner who for forty years held political office, provincially and federally. He left 65,000 pages of paper which I have read and I must say it is quite remarkable how little he ever referred to the press. Now he left office in 1958. To the degree that he referred to the press, he saw it as a practical utility. It was a supplement to the political party in presenting the government's programs and its policies to the voters.

There were key journalists that appeared, Grant Dexter, John Defoe, Bruce Hutchinson but the press was not seen in an adversarial capacity, it was not seen as particularly critical. On the other hand the parliamentary debates, as revealed through his own papers, were extensively covered and reported.

Today this is not so and I am interested in some of the reasons. Government turns out a vast quantity of information. It uses modern technology to do it and perhaps it has to do that because the media could not cover that amount of information even if it tried. The result is that the press has become much more of a synthesizer than it once was and what we have with the press and here I mean all of the media, a transition from an internal to an external observer of the political scene. This leads to the so-called interpretive journalism. Politicians are judged more critically and in turn the press is seen by the politician as more of an adversary than it once was.

It seems to me that the specialization we see in government, we now see in the press. We have environmental reporters, reporters on education, labour and health, a type of reporting we did not see earlier. There are some areas where we do not have reporters. One would be agriculture, at least in the national press. Coming from a region dependent upon agriculture, I think it is interesting if not alarming that agricultural interpretation tends to be done by regional reporters. One result I think is that it feeds the regional biases of Canada.

There is also less interest displayed by the press in legislatures and parliaments than before. Some reasons have already been suggested. I would like to ask some questions related to that. Are journalists less capable, less knowledgeable than before? In the past the press gallery was often seen as the peak of a career. Today it does not seem to be so. On the other hand, are legislatures less important than they were now that first ministers' conferences clearly determine the fate of Canada? The recent first ministers' conference on the Constitution and on native rights are examples.

The emphasis on the daily question period does not tell us a great deal about what is going on in legislatures and in

Parliament. It doesn't tell you what the difficult issues are and the consideration of legislation.

Canadian coverage of elections outside of Canada leaves much to be desired. I think of the last British election. If we were told once, we were told thirty times that if Mrs. Thatcher won the election it would be for a third term, the first time since Lord Liverpool that this has happened. Well, this is an interesting fact but I am not sure that its one that is of great significance in the modern period. On the other hand, we were never told on television what the results of the election were in Britain. We had to wait until we saw the newspaper and even then very frequently it was quite fragmented. The media seemed to me, to be quite caught up with the technology, particularly the graphics.

“I have yet to see an election coverage in Canada where all the election returns, at least on television, are reported. It does seem to me the one piece of information one wants to know is who has won and who has lost the election.”

One sometimes sees the press and the politicians cooperating almost to deprive the public of information. Not perhaps deliberately, nonetheless it happens. I am thinking here of leaks by the government or parliamentary committees and their use by the media or of the Forget report and its coverage and the debate that did not take place on it.

I also have some questions with which I would like to end my comments. Are we attaching too much importance to the press and the media in making and breaking careers? How

important is it to a career? Mr. Devine as a leader of a party which had never formed a government with the majority in this province was able to bring the Conservatives to one of the largest majorities in provincial history. This has happened in other provinces before. What was the importance of the press and the media to the Conservative success in 1982? Quite clearly, as he suggested as the invisible man, it was not a decisive influence. Was it of any influence or was it the very negative effect of the press actually working to the benefit of the Conservative party? What is the importance of leadership conventions which are frequently referred to as media events. We do see this great emphasis on personalities in Canadian politics. The apparent creating of reputations such as those of Mr. Clark, Mr. Turner and most recently Mr. Broadbent. He's been around for a long, long time but we are now being told about all his great virtues. I think probably Mr. Broadbent always had those virtues, if they are virtues, but they are being reinterpreted by the press for Canadians.

What happens in the provinces? Much of what has been said deals with national politics. But in the smaller provinces where the press may be limited to one or a handful of daily newspapers and to local television, what is the relationship between the media and the politician? How does the individual Member of Parliament or the member of the legislative assembly reach his or her constituents? Especially in competition with the high visibility of the party leaders and cabinet ministers. What is the effect of the electronic Hansard? I have asked this many times to members of legislatures in parliament, I have never really had a satisfying answer. They will say that many people watch it. How many people? What people? What is the effect of what they see? It strikes me as a very passive medium. How do parliamentarians see the respective role of the press and television? Is the influence different upon them? These are some major questions that might be considered and are central to the general question we have been asked to discuss. ■