

RELATIONS BETWEEN PARLIAMENT AND THE PRESS

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This paper considers relations between legislators and the press. The term "press" covers all printed or broadcast reports and comments.

At times it seems that the adversary relationship between Parliament and press is carried too far, that reporters or columnists over-step the bounds of fair comment. We discuss examples of such friction between the two in Canada and whether it is becoming more acute.

The paper has three sections:

1. Are Press and Parliament Adversaries?
2. Examples of Friction between Legislators and the Press.
3. Improving Relations.

1. Are Press and Parliament Adversaries?

There are, of course, moments of friction between political writers, editors, broadcasters or commentators and the legislators on whom they report. If the friction is intense or lasts for long, reporters and politicians may appear to be adversaries doing battle rather than

allies in a public enterprise.

Sometimes the press does more to thwart the ambitions of Government - federal or provincial - than the Official Opposition. This is especially true when an administration holds overwhelming power over its opponents. The press then becomes a natural brake on the government machine reminding ministers and bureaucrats that there will be a day of reckoning when voters call politicians to account.

Some may argue that it is healthy for the press and for Parliament - or other legislatures - to be at daggers drawn. Such rivalry keeps reporters on their toes and politicians alert, busy and honest, the argument runs.

It is doubtful, however, that the press and Parliament are naturally enemies. They need each other too much for occasional skirmishes to develop into open war.

To be effective Parliament has to stay closely attuned to the wishes and

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concerns of the electorate. They are either made known to MPs by voters or come to national attention by way of newspapers, radio or television.

Thus politicians, reporters, commentators, and editors are partners in democracy. The politician wants to get "ink" or "time" on the air, the reporter a story or a film clip.

Politicians and the press form an uneasy but durable alliance based on need. If they did not have newspaper and broadcast reports to fall back on, politicians would often come empty-handed to Question Period. Without Question Period parliamentary reporters would have a much leaner time.

They relish the mock warfare that goes on daily in Parliament; it provokes the disputants into rashness and displays of temper. These in turn generate news. But the careful reporter will not take sides in such a way as to lose the respect and confidence of politicians. They are valuable allies and sources. It is for the press to watch and assess the political battle without becoming embroiled in it.

The televising of Parliament has corrected some of the excesses of print or radio reports on legislatures. Writers and commentators often acted as a filter, blurring, or even distorting, the impressions left by legislators on the public mind. Legislators disliked having pundits interpret their words, motives and actions to the nation. A seasoned MP analyzed the difficulty thus:

"... the continuous televising of proceedings in the House would take this House out of the hands of the press gallery. We desperately need that to be done. Even if we say that the newspapers, radio and television of this country are doing as good a

job as they are capable of nevertheless the information we get ... is secondhand, selected and very often, unfortunately, hysterical and antagonistic. We have to take that power out of the hands of the press gallery. Certainly the gallery will still have its role to play. It can go on interpreting, and perhaps its role will even be enlarged. But there has to be something besides interpretation: there has to be a direct view of what is happening in this place ... The proceedings of this House have to be taken out of the hands of the media and broadcast directly to the people of this country." (1)

Television has rekindled interest in Parliament and may lessen public cynicism about democracy. Taxpayers now see and hear debates themselves rather than through the eyes, ears and judgement of reporters. It is healthy for the people "out there" to know what is going on.

Television's interaction with politics is part of a process that has moulded man's affairs for ages. Before mankind learned to write, speech linked individuals and groups fitfully in a fragmented society.

The goose quill, writing and print hastened civilization - with its towns, architecture, roads, armies, bureaucracies and taxes. Printing let loose a revolution of its own. Mass education and representative government developed. Print technology, according to some, created the public. Electric technology helped create the mass and altered democratic expression.

The age of oratory when gifted speakers or frenetic demagogues declaimed, exhorted, reviled or charmed at huge mass

meetings gave way to persuasion by radio. Politicians learned to live with the microphone. They are now coming to terms with the camera which sees through overblown rhetoric, synthetic anger, excess vehemence or empty bluster.

Whatever the changes, politicians and the press continue to be wary allies rather than adversaries. The press, however, bristles into attack when it sees a party abusing power and side-stepping parliamentary processes. In such a crisis broadcasters and journalists run the risk of becoming crusaders whose sense of mission warps their judgement. Serious friction between Parliament and the press may then develop.

2. Examples of Friction between Legislators and the Press

Slipshod reporting, especially if it implies that legislators are lazy and careless, angers Parliament. Thus before Christmas 1971 senators indignantly denied that the Upper House had considered a "hefty 739-page tax bill" for "only a few hours". In fact the Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce had spent three months and "26 or 28 meetings" on the massive tax reform measure, some of its meetings lasting for hours.

"We often sat more than once a day" said Senator John J. Connolly. "We heard 30 briefs and examined 129 witnesses and the examination of witnesses was not a formality in any sense of the word." (1)

Senator Connolly complained that a television reporter contended the Senate had examined the bill for "only four days ... as against 50 days spent by the other place". A newspaper correspondent had later trimmed this down to three days. The senator expected "that the

raising of these matters ... will probably have no effect on the press at all"; however, it was in Parliament's interest to speak out.

"The political commentators of this country, and, at times, politicians themselves show a very immature attitude toward the established institutions of our bicameral system. Their comment is without sophistication." (2)

The Acting Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, the Hon. Allister Grosart, remarked sadly:

"I am an old newspaperman, and I do not remember a single occasion in the reporting of any story at any time over a period of many years when all the facts on either side, on a pro and con basis, were presented. That is why I am concerned, and have been concerned for some time, about the impression that is widely held concerning the work of this chamber. I am more concerned now than I was a week ago." (3)

Politicians and the press have generally had difficulty agreeing about the timing and size of pension or salary increases for legislators. Ralph Stewart, when MP for Cochrane, accused the Globe and Mail of wishing "to do everything possible to discredit Members of Parliament". In a letter to the editor on May 4, 1970 he complained:

"Those who represent you in the Press Gallery know how much work we do and the difficult facilities with which we try to accomplish our role. You are not doing your job of informing the public,

(1) Senate of Canada. Debates. 22 December, 1971, p. 1732.

(2) Ibid., p. 1733.

(3) Ibid., p. 1734.

and on the contrary, you are deliberately trying to mislead your readers by slanting the facts completely.

Lately the target has been the improved pension for MP's. You never told how deplorable it has been in the past -- such as should make Canadians hang their heads in shame. You never mention that people who have spent their lives in service to the public are turned out to pasture with a pittance. My predecessor resigned at the age of 72 after a life of service and his pension is less than if he were on welfare. You know about this, but you fail to mention it. You know also that an Opposition Member in the House today replaced his father after 40 years of service to the public and yet the father's wife has to live on her husband's pension of \$91.00 per month. You know also that the situation in the past has been so deplorable that the last three Members who died had to have the hat passed around for their families -- and one was a Minister!" (1)

The member argued that a good, full-time MP makes many sacrifices and risks his future yet "you don't talk about that". He felt that the Globe only wished "to bring contempt on your representatives".

Evidently the paper did not mend its ways. Writing on April 29, 1971 Mr. Stewart said that the Globe of that day makes "such a concerted effort to discredit MPs ... that it cannot be allowed to pass without comment". Salaries were

once again the sore point. Mr. Stewart asked:

"Why this great crusade against us? Are we any less worthy members of society than members of other professions? Do we not contribute as much to the community as doctors, lawyers, school teachers, tradesmen and others who also are paid with the funds of the public? Are you afraid that our salary is coming too close to your own? It would be interesting to know what the increase of the editor of a newspaper has been from 1963 to 1971. Have you ever pointed out what percentage increase teachers have had in the past 8 years? By the way, are you taxed on the money you receive on your expense account?" (2)

The MP rejoiced that "your biased reporting on this matter does not impress" my constituents but "it is unfortunate that many other Canadians may be influenced by your one-sided half-truths".

On December 19, 1974 the Globe berated the Government and Official Opposition for favouring a measure to raise MPs' pay and allowances by 50%. The bill was withdrawn for amendment and all-party consideration. The newspaper's editorial, headed "What price leadership?", commented:

"It is a strange spectacle. The people elected by Canadians to provide leadership, by persuasion and example, toward the self-discipline that offers the only national defence against economic disaster, throw themselves into an orgy of incontinent

(1) Letters to the editor of the Globe & Mail written on May 4, 1970 and April 29, 1971.

(2) Ibid.

greed from which they are forced back only by the outraged indignation of those they were to lead." (1)

Since politicians lead a fish-bowl existence and are on the public payroll, editors will continue to goad parliamentarians on the subject of salaries. To unreasonable persons forming hasty judgments the pay and allowances may appear ample until one takes account of a politician's expenses.

Aislin of the Montreal Gazette reflected a popular view of politics in a cartoon portraying a "typical average candidate" during the 1979 federal election. His pitch to voters had this punch line:

"If we're lucky, you won't even hear my name at all until the next election! And why so humble you ask? Simple! Tell me an easier way to make \$41,300 a year?" (2)

Generally cartoonists have been free to harass politicians without fear of reprisal. On January 17, 1979 the Victoria Times' Bob Bierman learned that those days might be over. The B.C. Supreme Court ruled that Bierman must pay Municipal Affairs Minister William Vander Zalm \$3,500 and costs. Mr. Justice Craig Monroe found that a cartoon the Times ran in June, 1978 libelled the minister. It had depicted Vander Zalm, then Human Resources Minister, gleefully pulling the wings off flies. The defendant said he would appeal.

The Globe and Mail reported:

"During the three-day trial Mr. Vander Zalm ... testified that (the cartoon) implied he is cruel and sadistic, enjoys inflicting suffering and torture on helpless people

and was not fit to hold the welfare post. He said the cartoon may have been responsible for his transfer to his current portfolio in December.

His lawyer, Rodney Taylor, argued that the usual defence used by newspapers, that of fair comment on a matter of public concern, was not sufficient in this case because the cartoon was defamatory and contained imputations of improper, dishonorable or disgraceful conduct.

Mr. Bierman testified that he was attacking the minister, not the man. He said he was inspired to draw the cartoon after Mr. Vander Zalm advised Indian youngsters hanging around downtown Vancouver to return to their reserves because they had better opportunities there. He felt the minister was 'clipping their wings' and was unmindful of the suffering he was causing.

Mr. Vander Zalm testified that the statement had been taken out of context, and he had been expressing concern about all youngsters hanging around downtown.

Mr. Taylor told the court that the cartoon exceeded the extremely wide latitude allowed to people attacking holders of public office. He said The Times had refused to publish an apology." (3)

The decision upset political cartoonists; they feared it would hamper their work. Bierman said that if the judgement stands "we will have lost the fight, not

(1) Globe & Mail, 19 December, 1974.

(2) Gazette, 17 May, 1979.

(3) Globe & Mail, 18 January, 1979, p. 9.

just me and the Victoria Times but everybody - editors, newspapers, cartoonists, everybody concerned."

Terry Mosher (the Gazette's Aislin) commented that "satirical cartooning of political figures has been part of our society for hundreds of years ... this is the first case of this kind I know of that has gone against the cartoonist ... politicians have always been fair game". (1)

In the Gazette's view the spirit of censorship was abroad in the land. "If we believe in a free and open society, we must catch it and bottle it up again before it does any more damage." The newspaper said, in part:

"Surely one of the most important functions of political criticism is to raise the alarm when governments, even if acting in good faith, take actions that may have undesirable, perhaps even cruel, effects.

Any citizen - including a cartoonist - should be able to make such warnings. And if the warning on occasion turns out to be unjustified, better that than a system where there are no warnings at all.

Robert Stanfield once said that a politician who attacks a cartoonist only succeeds in making himself look even sillier than the original cartoon did. He was right.

And if that were all there were to it, the Bierman-Vander Zalm case might not matter. But unless this verdict is overturned on appeal, it sets a precedent

that will put a daily constraint on cartoonists' freedom to lampoon our society. We all lose from that.

All societies need court jesters, people to remind them of their own frailties; cartoonists, it has rightly been said, are our court jesters. They should not be muzzled." (1)

It is customary for newspapers and broadcasters to rally to the defence of "freedom of the press" when judgements hobble comment. But the lesson of the Bierman-Vander Zalm case is one of practical politics. Most seasoned legislators would agree with Mr. Stanfield - there is no political advantage in giving a cartoon wider currency by protesting.

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It's not unusual for legislators to be irked by the scoldings of commentators. Generally the issue is rowdy behaviour, flagrant abuse of the rules or flouting of the Speaker's authority.

In a column headed "Surely to God it's time..." Norman Webster had this to say about the Ontario Legislature in November, 1975:

"Something has to be done about the Speaker. His loss of control in the House becomes more noticeable every sitting day.

Two months ago the Camp Commission on the Legislature described question period at Queen's Park as 'a tumultuous argumentative, noisy free-for-all, marked by cat-calling, desk-thumping and personal shouts'.

Those were the good old days. Nowadays question period has

- (1) Globe & Mail, 18 January, 1979, p. 9.
- (2) Gazette, 18 January, 1979, p. 9.
- (3) Globe & Mail, 24 September, 1975.

become little but a noisy squabble, devoid of practical purpose, in which members on all sides disregard even the most elementary rules of order and exhibit, to an astonishing degree, contempt for the presiding officer.

It is the latter that is so bothersome ... insults are regularly directed both at the chair and the person of the Speaker himself (Russell Rowe, PC, Northumberland). It is a shameful display." (1)

Such strictures may have borne fruit. It appears that the Ontario Legislature is today less unruly. This is partly due to the firmness of Speaker Jack Stokes, criticized by some for being too rigid. Inevitably the press gallery are among the critics.

The Speaker ran into opposition from a reporter who declined to remove his coffee cup from the chamber. The incident did not perhaps merit all the attention it received in print and over the air. It did, however, show that someone was willing to do battle for decorum.

It is natural that as the Speaker took firmer control there would be press complaints that he was too strict. He ordered a stairway behind the Speaker's chair closed to reporters who had rushed down it after question period to catch ministers leaving the chamber. The gallery thought this was interfering with news coverage of the legislature. Mr. Speaker stuck to his guns. The Globe reported:

"Mr. Stokes said the Legislature in the past has been referred to by the press as a circus. If the Speaker isn't going to clean it up he asked

'who is goint to?'

'It may be fair to say that I did come down with a heavy hand. Everyone said that's what was needed. Then when I did that, everybody was surprised.'" (2)

Generally reporters and politicians at Queen's Park make it clear that they bear each other no ill will. Even when Government Whip Mickey Hennessy threatened to punch a columnist in the mouth for declaring "politicians are jerks", no one became distressed. (3)

Although at times the press watch over politicians appears pompous and self righteous, most citizens would probably agree that it is healthy. Acidic editorials (4) about committees of the Ontario Legislature journeying in Florida in midwinter to study auto insurance or spending three weeks abroad in several attractive capitals to examine the role of the Ontario Ombudsman serve to dissuade others from extravagance at the public's expense.

Since few taxpayers read Hansard it is fortunate that the press is quick to draw attention to undignified exchanges between legislators. Seeing their remarks in print or hearing them over the air can be a salutary experience for politicians.

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3. Improving Relations

If there is fighting between legislatures and the press both sides are aware that it is generally mock warfare, no more wounding than the political skirmishing that goes on in Parliament. The tension that exists there between observers and actors is healthy, ensuring that the public is well served and abuses corrected. There is no reason to believe that friction between Press and Parlia-

(1) Globe & Mail, 24 September, 1975.

(2) Globe & Mail, 7 October, 1978.

(3) Ottawa Journal, 25 October, 1978, p. 10.

(4) Globe & Mail, 30 January and 7 February, 1978.

ment has become more acute recently. Some have blamed reporters, often fairly, for Parliament's decline in public esteem. Witness the remarks of the Hon. Jack Horner when P.C. member for Crowfoot:

"Who is it who projects across the country the image of members not working? It is the vultures who sit up there. They are the ones who project this image across the country. No wonder we have a man coming to Ottawa and attempting to throw a bomb into this chamber....

The vultures sit up there waiting to see whether or not a member is going to be in a dangerous position. Then they flock in and feast upon the bones. If we are all healthy and working there is nothing sensational about which they can write so they circle high and stay away. They know nothing and care nothing about a parliament which is working. They want sensationalism to sell their newspapers and capture the imagination of the television and radio audiences. They have agitated the public and discredited the House of Commons all across Canada. They alone are responsible for the disrespect in which this house is held. It is high time that they educated themselves." (1)

Unfortunately news concerns itself with crisis, with the offbeat, sensational, scandalous or shocking. Hence reporters pick through the debates looking for headlines or pegs on which to hang a story.

The astute politician who wishes to attract news attention has to humour and befriend the press for most of the year with little hope of reaping an advantage. But, now and again, having noted the angles and attitudes publishers and broadcasters favour, he is able to make a statement he knows will arouse interest, e.g. some editors are unable to resist the bait when offered an item flavoured with "nationalism" or "anti-Americanism".

Such stratagems pay dividends for those politicians who have to work hard to keep their names in the public prints or on the air. Others, because of their office or their personality, appear to have trouble keeping out of the news.

Politicians as a rule overestimate the importance of the press. Some fret if a story about them is buried on page 43 under a one-column head instead of being played on page 1. They should reflect that within a day or so the whole thing would be forgotten anyway.

More skilful parliamentarians never or rarely upbraid the press. They are careful to avoid pleas that they were misquoted, unless of course a grave matter is at issue and a correction has to be made. Their main concern is to remind voters that the candidate they sent to the legislature is busy in their interests.

This commonsense view is true of Parliament as a whole. The press respects legislators who do good work but derides a chamber which lowers itself by posturing, bickering and time-wasting inefficiency. Improving the product is Parliament's best way to improve relations with the press.

(1) Canada. House of Commons Debates. 26 January, 1967, p. 12279.