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# Media Relations and the Image of Parliament

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Colleen Soetaert, MLA

*The interaction between parliamentarians and the press is critical because the media is a filter through which the general public views the institution of Parliament. This article offers pointers to new and veteran legislators interested in improving their working relationship with members of the press.*

I think everyone in politics has something to say and something to learn about working with the press. We all have a horror story of how we were misquoted. Sometimes we have to read the newspaper to see what we did yesterday because what the press says is what many people are going to believe whether it is entirely accurate or not. We all would agree that the press is absolutely essential for our job and for our system of government.

I remember my very first interview before the 1993 election. I was quite green and nervous but I thought the interview went well until I saw the headline. "Villeneuve Mom Seeks Seat." Now I am proud to be a mom, but I had also been teaching for years and I had volunteered in the community. But you see the connotation? A mom was running for office, obviously willing to neglect her family. In rural Alberta that has a different tone than in some more urban centres.

So what do you do when that happens? In this case I decided to call. "You would not say Villeneuve dad seeks seat. I am very proud to be a mom but that is not the only criteria for running." I think the journalist realised the bias of that title.



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On another occasion a writer with the *Sun* in Edmonton wrote in a column: "The Liberals are going on retreat with left wing fembo Colleen Soetaert. Fembo. Is that a feminist bimbo or a feminist rambo? I did not really know but I figured it was not good. He had not once interviewed me but I was the women's issues critic so I must be a fembo, whatever that is. What to do with such a columnist? In this case I just shrugged.

When talking about the media and politicians we have to be careful not to generalise. Some politicians want to be in the news and some do not. I was speaking to a minister one day and he said to me: "Colleen, a good day for me is when I am not in the press."

For opposition members a good day is if you are in the paper even if it is the last line of the last paragraph: "Liberal transportation critic Colleen Soetaert says, Highway 794 is a death trap." Ah, I am in the news!

We also have to take into account the nature of our ridings. I am from a small rural riding. We have four local papers. We get covered more, I think, than one MLA in a big city. They are looking for news, and if you are credible and you have done your homework, you will get covered. I think that small local papers are read cover to cover far more than the papers in large cities.

***I do not think it serves us well to be overly close to the press, but the relationship should be built upon honesty and respect.***

There are no courses on how to be a good politician or how to deal with the press and the learning curve is pretty steep. Nevertheless I would like to suggest a few basic rules that can be helpful.

***Nothing is off the record.*** I know many reporters fairly well, but I never say anything to them that I could not handle being read in the paper the next day. They have a job to do, and if you are talking to them and it is newsworthy, they have an obligation to report it, even if it is, "A Liberal who will remain unnamed...." Usually it is not hard to figure out the source so in my relations with the press nothing is off the record.

***Do your homework.*** How often are you caught off guard and end up doing an interview without prior notice. If you can avoid that, you should. It is important not to get caught off guard, especially if you are emotional after some debate, or angry. Those are times when you should give yourself a chance to cool down and think about it. In my office I have Marilyn who is God's gift to me and my family, who always finds out what issue the press wants to talk about. You have a right to say: "Let me do a little homework and I will get back to you."

We cannot possibly be experts on everything. In my area, I am often asked to speak on everything from health care to gas co-ops, so I have to do some homework before I speak. Sometimes I say: "Well, you know, the critic on that is Ken Nicol down in Lethbridge." They say: "No,

no, we want the local comment." So I phone Ken and ask for help.

***Do not fight fire with fire.*** If you are asked a question that contains offensive language or simply words you do not like, do not repeat them, even to deny them. Once in the Legislature, a member was talking about maintenance enforcement and used the term "vindictive leech mom". Well, of course, as a women's issues critic, I went to the press, and as I was talking to the reporter he used the term "deadbeat dad". I responded to that, but guess whose name was tied with deadbeat dad? You do not want to know the calls I got the next day; probably as many as the vindictive leech guy. I had never used the term but I answered to it, instead of saying "non-custodial parent" or some other term. That experience taught me a bit.

***Tell the truth even if it hurts.*** I remember once in our caucus something dreadful had happened and people asked how are we going to spin this. Betty Hughes said: "We are going to tell the truth." I live by that. She is a wise woman respected in Alberta by people of all political stripes.

Have you ever gone to a school classroom and said: "How many of you think all politicians are liars and cheaters?" I feel bad about the negative image of politicians. We need to combat this and that means do not lie and do not get caught with your hand in the cookie jar. We have to collectively work at changing the negative image. Only our close families and friends know how much we really work – the hours we put in it.

***Make your point and get out.*** When doing an interview make your point and get out of there, because believe me, if you start to ramble you will dig a hole. Nick Taylor, who is a Senator now and was an MLA in Alberta, used to say to the MLAs: "Remember, when you are talking to the press you are not in the confessional." It was a good lesson. You do not have to tell all. Answer it and get out of there.

***Do not use jargon*** We often forget that we have a language of our own. In the House there are all types of acronyms such as Beauchesne or Erskine May. Many people do not have a clue what we are talking about. I will even say QP, and they will ask: "What is QP?" (Question Period). We forget it is a language we understand but certainly the general public does not.

***Image is important*** In my family probably only my dad is truly interested in policy. He and I chat often. With everybody else it is: "Big deal, we will work for you at

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election time, and leave us alone in between." I was driving home late at night after the House had closed and I phoned mom and dad. I was talking with them about the day in the Legislature and I said: "Dad, did you hear the question?" He said: "Yes, it was a pretty good question." Mom was on the other line too and she said: "Colleen, you know the outfit you wore? Well, it made you look quite wide. Could you go with the stripes going down?" I said: "Thank you, mother, that is really nice to know."

She was right. Public image is very important. Do not answer questions with your tie crooked or with a pen coming out of your pocket. I think it is very important we have that professional look in the Legislature. Betty Hughes' trick was always to put on fresh lipstick just before an interview because it made you look alive and energetic. I do not think that would help some of you men out there. Although, it could get you coverage.

*Remember the human perspective* Many electors do not see us as real people running around to volleyball games, picking up grandchildren, going to the orthodon-

tist. *The Edmonton Sun* did a story on romantic moments on some profile people. They phoned me and said: "Colleen, would you mind sharing a romantic story with us?" I said: "Could I call you back?" I had to think when was the last time a politician had time for a little romance. I ended up telling a story about riding in the mountains – because we have horses and we ride in the mountains every summer – and once my husband hauled water up from the river so that I could have a shower. For me, camping in the mountains and having a shower – that is romantic. All the other stories were about balloons and flowers and hotel rooms but, I have to tell you, many people commented on my story because it showed a human dimension to our lives.

*Be yourself.* Finally and most important be yourself. Smile and let the people see the real you. Thousands voted for you and when you get into the news in a positive way I think it reaffirms that they were correct in choosing you to speak for them.