

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: The Media and Parliament

From my perspective the media and parliamentarians should see their relationship as complementary and not competitive. MPs are elected to represent the views of their riding, to help constituents access government services, to influence policy discussions and as opposition members, to keep the government in check.

The role of political journalists is to lurk in corners to bring to light facts that those in power would prefer to leave in shadow. They help the public make informed decisions in their own lives, a key ingredient for a vibrant democracy. Their motivation can be summed up in an old saw that reporters try to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Premier Ralph Klein of Alberta has criticized the media for simply following what he terms the five Cs - conflict, controversy, confusion, chaos, and confrontation. So it is easy to see why some politicians, worried about slingshots and arrows, prefer to steer clear of reporters. However politicians should also realize that they can use journalists to their advantage. A reporter can take on the cause of MP who is trying to fight an immigration or justice case. He or she could help highlight the need for tax breaks for farmers, or resource industries or high tech industries that would benefit an individual riding. Simply put, the media can be used to give local issues a broader airing. It is obvious that the power of the media is mightier than any individual parliamentarian when it comes to showcasing larger issues such as child poverty or AIDS, particularly in the era of TV.

The media in Canada has even found itself taking over the role of parliamentarians and becoming the "official opposition" of sorts in provinces such as New Brunswick or Prince Edward Island or British Columbia after the electorate has virtually elected a complete slate of government members with little to no opposition. There may also be a

tendency for members of the media to go beyond reporting and serve as pundits or analysts in discussing the important issues of the day on TV and radio programs. This role might better be served by politicians. Perhaps this should serve as a warning for MPs to be more accessible and better groomed in the art of sound bites should they want to get their message out directly to the public.

What I would like to highlight is the negative trends in the relationship between parliamentarians and the media. In recent years, there has been more and more power concentrated in the Office of the Prime Minister and his supporting bureaucracy in the Privy Council Office. There has been an increasing use of closure to limit debate and marginalize the role of MPs. Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien ran a pragmatic rather than a visionary government. And in the dying days of his government, many Liberal MPs had joined a crusade to try to undermine their own boss. All of this has helped lead to an emphasis on the politics of personality versus a politics based on policy. Cranky MPs under the

shield of anonymity have been using willing reporters to air their grievances, and journalists have been quick to highlight the trivial, such as an MP muttering under her breath that "she hates those bastards" in reference to Americans.

The new Prime Minister Paul Martin has made it a key priority to address what he calls the "democratic deficit" to help empower MPs, and this could lead to more animated policy discussions and therefore to a positive change of journalism as well. However on a more negative note, there also appears to be an obsession among his advisors in the PMO to control the media message.

The divided opposition has fed the politics of personality as well. They have used Question Period to make personal attacks and gone out of their way to use "charged" language rather than concentrating on policy issues. They apparently

