



# Parliamentary Book Shelf

**Gendered News: Media Coverage and Electoral Politics in Canada** by Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2013, 246p.

In early February, Liberal MP Chrystia Freeland rose to ask her first question in the House of Commons. For most new MPs, that initiation is usually a proud, if intimidating, milestone. For Freeland, who had won a tough Toronto by-election in November, it was a test of fortitude. The former business journalist was asking about the prospects for Canada's economic recovery when the Conservative heckling commenced. The Speaker interceded twice but the mostly male voices jeered more loudly. On her third try, Freeland finished a truncated query. Shortly after a federal minister replied with a stock answer, *Vancouver Observer* journalist D. Matthew Millar offered his advice: "Put on your "big girl" voice for [for Question Period]," he tweeted, "the Hon. Members water glasses are shattering." [sic]

It has been almost a century since women won the right to vote in federal elections – but the quest for equality remains elusive. Barriers to women's participation in politics have toppled as party brass, fundraisers, riding association members and voters increasingly view them as desirable candidates. But, as Queen's University political scientist Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant

explains, women's representation in federal and provincial governments remains "stubbornly short" of the 30 per cent of legislative seats generally required for women to make a difference in politics. What accounts for this continuing disparity? Through an analysis of television coverage of the party leaders in the 2000 federal election and print coverage of candidates in the 2006 election, Goodyear-Grant examines the media's "important role in shaping voters' perceptions of female leaders and candidates and of the political world generally, thus influencing voters' support for female politicians."

The result is an important look at a relatively unexplored topic: the complicated relationships among the media, the politicians and the voters. The media do not come out well. Goodyear-Grant argues that the mainstream media present women as different from their male colleagues in far more "insidious" ways than Freeland experienced. She maintains that men dominate the news media, journalists reflect that culture, and the resulting gendered news contributes to the idea that femaleness "is different, alien to politics, or even *unwelcome* in politics." In effect, the media have unwittingly adopted the broader culture's mental frameworks that organize their beliefs and knowledge about gender. Then they filter events through a schema in which politics is

viewed as a masculine world – and news stories rely heavily on masculine language, symbols and metaphors.

Goodyear-Grant does not pretend to have easy answers for this dilemma in which the voters, the media and the politicians themselves play roles. She could not consider the vital role that social media now plays – and certainly should play – in upsetting the balance in these relationships, allowing politicians to bypass media filters. She is also naïve and occasionally wrong about the way that journalists operate, especially on Parliament Hill.





Indeed, she should have posed a few basic questions to journalists to balance her interviews with politicians on how they handled and occasionally manipulated the effect of their gender on their media coverage.

Despite those flaws, *Gendered News* remains a worthy eye-opener. Goodyear-Grant teases out findings from the 2000 Canadian Election Study of television coverage by four networks, as well as data from the McGill Media Observatory on print coverage of the 2006 campaign by seven major newspapers. She found gender equity in visibility in televised news and print. But there is no similar balance in *how* women and men were covered. In 2000, 70 per cent of the news coverage of New Democratic Party leader Alexa McDonough depicted her as attacking her opponents, while the coverage of the four male party leaders was not similarly

skewed. McDonough's sound bites were also remarkably longer when she attacked, in contrast to the treatment of her male peers.

Such selective treatment was damaging. Using that election study from 2000 and a media reception look at Toronto voters, Goodyear-Grant finds that this distorted depiction of the usually cool-headed McDonough hurt her; male party leaders were generally not penalized for such attacks. (Prime Minister Jean Chrétien did go too far, however, when he combined verbal attacks with aggressive body language.) Goodyear-Grant argues that when women attack, it contradicts cultural norms: "It is all the more newsworthy, because it is surprising and atypical."

There are other wake-up calls. The televised coverage of McDonough usually focused on her activities or campaign trail events – as opposed to polls that might have flagged her viability as a candidate. McDonough was more associated with so-called soft issues such as health care as opposed to hard issues such as the economy – although the media could have simply picked up on the NDP's campaign focus. Perhaps most worrisome, *every* story that provided journalistic interpretations of McDonough's message in the television lead-ins and wrap-ups failed to offer "evidence or reasoning to substantiate the interpretive content." The number for men was "significantly lower."

In the 2005-2006 election, women candidates faced glaringly sexist references of their personal lives in print coverage, including their childlessness and marital status. Women did, however, receive less personal coverage when they built up a reputation as competent

politicians. Happily, there was no statistically significant difference in the coverage of the professional qualifications of male and female candidates. As well, the tone of news stories on the electoral prospects of female and male candidates did not differ. When the coverage of challengers was isolated from that of incumbents, however, female candidates were more associated with soft issues than male challengers. Journalists have seemingly absorbed gender stereotypes.

But Goodyear-Grant goes astray when she asserts that the news media reflect the male-dominated hierarchies in newsrooms who want to attract advertisers with an audience of affluent, older, white males. The news may be a function of culturally skewed selection and the media hierarchy does remain top-heavy with men. But editors and journalists, male and female, are far more concerned about beating their competitors to a story than placating advertisers. There are usually sturdy walls between publishers and editors – although they can be breached. As well, contrary to her assertion, television reporters do write their own copy. Finally, she should have applied even more skepticism to the complaints of former Prime Minister Kim Campbell: after all, Campbell did pose holding her judicial robes in front of her bare shoulders; and much of her ire was aimed at coverage that examined her professional credentials.

Last February, when Freeland faced jeers, she remained composed – and chided the Conservatives. Within minutes of journalist Millar's tweet, before Question Period even ended, she shot back: "This is 2014!"

Millar apologized. Goodyear-Grant suggests that female politicians, their male allies and political parties should “take every opportunity to challenge prevailing (masculine) norms.” Perhaps that prompt apology represents progress. But this scholarly book indicates that damaging gendered assumptions still underpin Canada’s media and political worlds – and they do influence the voters.

**Mary Janigan**

Journalist and Author of *Let The Eastern Bastards Freeze in the Dark: The West Versus The Rest Since Confederation*

**O.D. Skelton: The Work of The World, 1923-1941 Edited by Norman Hillmer, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2013, 517p.**

Although many civil servants will concur that their chosen profession has the potential to bring them much personal fulfillment, few would suggest they enter this field with visions of achieving great fame. Some might even argue that fame—or worse, notoriety—is exactly what civil servants are expected to avoid at all cost. Theirs is a working life confined mostly to obscurity while the ministers of their departments operate as the public face of their collective efforts, successes and failures.

With this in mind, it is refreshing to see an historian shine a light on the work of one civil servant whose counsel on foreign policy was routinely sought by both Liberal and Conservative prime ministers during a period of great international upheaval. Carleton University professor Norman Hillmer’s edited collection of

Oscar Douglas Skelton’s official memoranda, diaries and letters provides readers with not only a portrait of a trusted civil servant, but also the man behind the memos. Hillmer’s informative introductory note presents a strong narrative foundation for the subsequent collection of annotated documents. Reproduced chronologically and divided by key events or periods, he provides readers with a window into the world of a biographer working his way through the archives.

When Skelton was recruited to the Department of External Affairs in 1923, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King deemed the new hire’s staunch anti-imperialism (at least with respect to the British Empire in Canada) and his proscriptions for an independent Canadian foreign policy to be a strong foundation for the country’s approach to external affairs. The new hire would almost immediately make his mark with a memorandum titled “Canada and the Control of Foreign Policy,” which King brought to his first Imperial Conference as prime minister.

Some historians have dismissed Skelton’s work on this document, which outlined Canada’s emerging foreign policy, as that of a partisan hack (he had been active in Liberal circles for some time and had previously worked with King at the end of Laurier’s government) and an effort which sought to solve problems that no longer existed in terms of British imperialist designs on the dominions and colonies. However, in his introductory note, Hillmer suggests that while it was clearly a partisan document, Skelton’s memorandum was a direct

response to Britain’s continued insistence on “diplomatic unity” and deference to the British Foreign Office on important matters. Furthermore, he notes that Skelton’s interventions, which played a role in the dominions’ constitutional progress, were credited by South Africa’s prime minister as helping to make it “Canada’s conference.”

Hillmer’s thoughtful choice of annotations in these documents equips readers with information that provide context and colour. For instance, in an excerpt of the famous 1923 memorandum, Hillmer highlights a hand-written note of approval (“very good”) from Mackenzie King beside a passage noting that although each part of the Empire has its own distinct sphere of interests, these spheres occasionally intersect and some interests are shared. Other notes offer important historical explanation, introductions to key players or citations for further exploration.

Hillmer’s biographical sketch

