

January 11, 2005

OttawaWatch 8: Journalism in political context

By Lloyd Mackey

*In early 2005, I had opportunity to teach a six-week course at Trinity Western University, entitled **Journalism in political context**. It was an opportunity to share with communication students at the university, some concepts which I have tried to learn and practice through what had, at that point, been a four-decade community, business, political and faith-based journalism career.*

Last week, for *OttawaWatch* and its writer, part of the routine was travel time, to what is variously known as the west, wet or left coast.

The main reason for the trip is to teach Communications 471, a six-week course at Trinity Western University, entitled *Journalism in political context*.

As with any quick trips across the country, weather comparisons were the order of the day. On Friday, with the temperature at the university approximating 0 C, some students were complaining of the cold. My response was to gently suggest that it felt like Ottawa in March. By Monday, people were complaining about the 50 mm. of rain that took the snow away. I suggested gently that it felt like Ottawa in April.

Weather needs to be seen in context: Likewise, politics.

As my first post-retirement activity, this teaching assignment will hopefully provide my students with some context through which to report on and analyze the political scene, should they choose journalism as a career. And, turnabout style, it provides me a few weeks to be unlocked from the potential cabin fever that the Ottawa political scene occasionally inflicts on its participants.

If we get through all the material that has been written into the course syllabus, the students will have the opportunity to examine the dynamic relationship between the press and political institutions found in democratic, totalitarian and theocratic societies. They will explore the role of the journalist as a writer, editor and news-shaper on the municipal, provincial and federal level. And they will scrutinize the interplay among political parties, advocacy organizations and regional interests.

In looking at political institutions, we will deal not only with the most obvious – like parliaments and legislatures – but will identify politically-shaped institutions in the worlds of religion, business, the arts, labor and education. Any organization that elects representatives to act in the interests of its respective community is innately political in nature.

Given the fact that Trinity Western is a Christian university, there is opportunity to focus on the interfacing of the worlds of faith and politics.

One interesting aspect of the course could well be the examination, side-by-side, of two books. They are:

- *Hidden Agendas: How journalists influence the news* by Barry Cooper and Lydia Miljan. (UBC Press, 2003)
- *Sustaining Democracy: Journalism and the politics of objectivity* by Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao (Garamond Press, 1998)

Hidden Agendas was written with the encouragement of the right-leaning Fraser Institute. *Sustaining Democracy* had the backing of the left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Both books have substantive comment on the stories that journalists miss or, for whatever reason, fail to report.

Hidden Agendas provide some convincing arguments for the idea that reportage is incomplete or biased because the media, as a rule, leans left, somewhat to the dismay of those who believe that the political right gets short shrift. It would conclude that journalism is best and most free when it is unfettered from government control.

Sustaining democracy argues in an equally convincing manner that corporate control of the media means right-leaning stories get the best play. Its authors would suggest that such corporate control is best kept in check through some sort of state regulation of news organizations.

My only regret about being away from Ottawa for these next six weeks is that I will not be able to observe, at close range, some of the issues that will be on the table. The first weeks of the same-sex marriage debate will take place during that time, as will the introduction of the minority government's first budget since last summer's election.

But the counterbalancing consideration is that I will be able to examine, with the students, the day-to-day coverage and analysis of these two stories and others.

And, much to my wonderment, current technology will enhance that examination. Last time I taught at Trinity Western, almost a decade ago, high speed internet was in its infancy and the projection equipment to transfer a laptop image onto an overhead screen was both expensive and complex to operate.

The availability of that technology in the classrooms where I will be teaching makes it much easier to read and discuss breaking stories and other political documentation in real time terms.

And where is the gospel in all this?

For me, reconciliation is a biblical and gospel concept. And politics is, at its best, the reconciling of conflicting interests.

* * *

Lloyd Mackey was a member of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery in Ottawa for 15 years, from 1998 until 2013 and continues as an honorary member, in retirement. OttawaWatch Archives contains the reporting and analysis columns he wrote from Ottawa during that period. His brief biographical notes are on the home page. He can be reached at lloydmackey@shaw.ca.