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## Ottawa *Watch* 340: Reforms to welcome – and wish for

By Lloyd Mackey

*Not too long after I wrote this piece, Tom Korski and his wife, Holly Doan pulled together a group of press gallery-based journalists to form Blacklock's Reporter, a news service that was sub-titled "Minding Ottawa's Business."*

*Some of my colleagues and desk mates in the gallery made up the team and, a decade later, remain active in chasing stories that take a little more digging than is often the case in mainstream media.*

*Two on the team – Alex Binkley and Kevan Baker-Voakes -- continue their excellent Blacklock's work, in addition to other free-lance activities. And Tom, during my time in the gallery, was well capable of smoking out faith-political perspectives which did not stand up to moral or ethical scrutiny. And most of the time, he was on the money.*

*But, there was a time or two when I would let Korski know – congenially, of course -- that "that ain't the way I heard it". That phrase is taken from the story of Thomas Hyland Blacklock, for whom Korski named his news service.*

*Here is that story, as told on the Blacklock website:*

*Remembered for his newsroom credo – "That ain't the way I heard it!" – Thomas Hyland Blacklock was a pioneer publisher and war correspondent. Born in Halton County, Ont. in 1870, he became a frontier editor and first mayor of Weyburn, Sask. in 1903. Assigned to Parliament Hill by the Winnipeg Telegram in 1912 Tom remained a gallery man for life with columns published from Victoria to Halifax. As a WWI correspondent for the Montreal Gazette he was a passionate advocate of the troops, and became a confidante of Prime Minister Robert Borden. "I always held him in the warmest affection," Borden recalled. In peacetime Tom served as 1922 president of the Ottawa Press Gallery and co-founded the Canadiana news service. At his death in 1934, the entire Ottawa press corps mourned Tom as "a keen observer blessed with a sense of proportion."*

I had almost forgotten the time line. But it is now 15 years since *Like Father, Like Son: Ernest Manning and Preston Manning* (ECW Press, 1997) emerged from my computer, went through an editor's mind, then a printing press, before turning itself into a book.

This was a true story, written from a faith-political interface perspective that ended with the early years of the Reform Party of Canada. Since then, of course, the story re-emerged in a Conservative-led Parliament which has now been in power for six years. And it has its own faith-political interface narrative.

The “Reform” reminder caused me to reflect on that word, on two counts:

- The first is to appreciate a tiny reform which took place recently at Forest Brook Community Church in Ajax/Pickering, Ontario, just east of Toronto.
- The second is to indulge in wistful thinking about some potential reforms in parliamentary debate, in line with conciliatory and collaborative concepts that might, at this stage, seem quite radical.

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I am indebted to Tom Korski, a columnist at *The Hill Times*, who told about Forest Brook’s emergence as a polling place in last May’s federal election. Korski’s conclusions about the advisability of such a development differ somewhat from mine. I will leave it to readers to read his report, at [www.hilltimes.com](http://www.hilltimes.com). (You might have to sign up for a free trial to access the column, if you are not already a *Hill Times* subscriber.)

My own perspective is that Forest Brook did a fine thing.

And here is why: I grew up in the Plymouth Brethren assemblies, who, at one time, were noted for being somewhat separated from the political process. Further, their gospel halls and bible chapels were used for strictly-defined worship and gospel purposes.

Forest Brook is one of a number of “assemblies” that have found their niches in community service – without diluting the “Christian” aspects of such service. Go to their website, [www.forestbrook.ca](http://www.forestbrook.ca), and read their rental initiatives. They have a commodious building that accommodates around 1,000 regular worshippers, and they want the community to be able to use that building for many compatible purposes. While hosting polling places only happens at election times, it is symbolic of a church’s desire to serve, not only its own people, but their friends and neighbours, no matter their varied affiliations.

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The reforms for which I wistfully long are many. Just two relate to “time allocation” and the will to collaborate.

Whenever government wants to allocate a specific time for debate on a piece of legislation, opposition understandably complains that those holding power are choosing dictatorship over democracy.

From this perspective, it would seem that debate could become very much more efficient and effective if opposition and government could agree on time allocation.

The responsibility, for opposition, would be to marshal its arguments so as to say, effectively, in two or three hours, what might otherwise turn into an obstructionist 20 or 30 hours of debate.

Government, for its part, could be much more willing, given reasonable policy constraints, to accept opposition amendments. That, as well, could cut debate time and increase legislative efficiency – without impinging on democratic practice.

I will concede that such reform would involve many attitudinal changes on the part of governments and oppositions. And, further, it would involve structural changes in our adversarial parliamentary system. It might take a while – maybe decades – but many of the social tools that would enable such changes are here today, where they were not 50 or 100 years ago.

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Churches, like Forest Brook, are able to speak into – and listen – to their communities, in ways that recognize what some are calling our post-modern era. They are able to respond to people who long for relationship-building and an end to ideological and theological divisiveness.

Maybe nations and their political movements can yet learn something from their oft-ignored ecclesiastical counterparts.

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