

# Conversation

## with Fred Fletcher

Fred Fletcher has worked as a reporter for the Vancouver *Province* and the Vancouver *Sun*. During his student days, he was the editor of the *Ubysses*, the student newspaper at the University of British Columbia. He has been a professor of political science at York University since 1971, while continuing to act as a freelance contributor to newspapers, radio and television. Fletcher recently met with *Excalibur's* Neil Wiberg to discuss politics and the media.

### How would you describe the state of Canadian political journalism today?

I think that it is improving somewhat. There are more people with academic qualifications who can assess budgetary policies, who can assess court decisions and so on. In the past almost all the political journalists were people who worked their way up from being general reporters and then went into political journalism without any special skills.

### Which newspapers would you describe as good in terms of political journalism in Canada?

On the whole, I think the best newspaper is the *Globe*. It provides good general straightforward reporting and good analysis. Geoffrey Stevens is one of the most impressive columnists in the country from the point of view of serious analysis of things. Jeff Simpson, who is the new bureau chief in Ottawa for the *Globe*, is an exceptionally good reporter. He is unusual in a couple of respects. He has been a parliamentary intern so he understands the parliamentary process unusually well. He is fluently bilingual which is very unusual. Among the anglophone journalists—there are about 140 reporters in the Ottawa Press Gallery—only about eight of them are fluent in French. That's scandalous.

But the *Star* did a very good job of covering the election last time. The *Star* probably did the best coverage of the election. They stood back from things. Not only did they cover the leaders and what was going on, but they tried to explain what various policy positions meant. They tried to get hold of experts who could tell them, for example, if the mortgage deductibility proposal was good, what it would do to people, whether it would work. We are fortunate in Toronto to probably have the best two English language newspapers in the country.

I don't read *Le Devoir* regularly but it is an exceptionally good newspaper. It has something that most English newspapers don't. It takes ideas seriously. Most English language newspapers are still focused on events and situations.

### Which newspapers in Canada would you describe as bad?

There are two kinds of bad political journalism. One is the kind of bland, neutral, pablum that you get in a paper like the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, or the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, or the *Thunder Bay Chronicle Herald* or the *Sudbury Star*. We have a lot of those. Most of the average-sized daily newspapers are not very good. They just take the stuff off the C.P. wire, and it has no punch, is not interesting to read, and is not very revealing either.

Then you have the other kind of bad political journalism, which may be interesting to read, but is biased and opinionated. That's the kind you get in the *Toronto Sun*. Their news stories are not so bad, but they don't cover politics very well in their news stories. The best political material in the *Sun* is in the columns. Some of their columnists, like Douglas Fisher and John Downing, are very good.

### What about magazines in Canada today?

There are several good magazines. *Macleans* has been disappointing. It has good people in Ottawa but it is not very hard hitting. It has confined itself to a kind of newspaper magazine role.

I found *Saturday Night* very useful. Sandra Gwyn is one of the best of the Ottawa columnists. She writes fairly regularly for *Saturday Night*. She gets behind the scenes — gets into the realities of the power relationships among groups and people in Ottawa. Christina Newman, who is not writing for *Saturday Night* right now, but who has written a column, is also very good.

Then there is a whole range of opinion magazines like *Canadian Forum* and the *Last Post* and so on.

### What effect has television had on politicians in the last decade?

Television has been the major source of change in political journalism in Canada. Originally, television



coverage was not very good on two counts. The news coverage tended to be very short — 30, 60, 90 seconds — and the public affairs programs tended to be exceedingly dull.

Public Affairs programs have really improved. They are doing a lot of interesting investigation now. Every once in a while, public affairs programs, such as the *Fifth Estate* or *W5*, do something really serious and important that is not done by the print media.

Newscasts are improving as well. During the last election, the CBC did some innovative things. They had an issues team in Ottawa which was responsible for looking seriously at the proposals of the various parties. They also set up a computerized system for retrieving past stories so that they could compare what Joe Clark said during the campaign with what he said six months before. One of the main flaws of television news has been the lack of any sense of history. It was difficult to find out what had happened in the past. All the stories occurred as if they had just happened, with no background to them.

In another dimension, television has had a series of effects. It has made politics more leader oriented. It has caused the leaders to alter their campaign styles so that they focus on what will sell on television. They focus on 30, 60 or 90 second ideas which can be packaged for television. The people who were on the campaign trail last time felt that the campaign was heavily dominated by television and that all of the three major party leaders crossing the country focussed their campaigns on television. This made them more superficial and more manipulative.

### How great an effect does the media have on election results?

It's hard to trace. My personal belief is that the media does make a significant difference, because the people who are most likely to change their minds between elections are the people who are most likely to be influenced — especially by television coverage. But when you study voting behaviour you find that it is hard to trace the actual impact of the media because they influence people in different directions according to their preconceptions.

In the last campaign of '79, it is probable that most people had made up their minds before the campaign. So they were looking for reinforcement of a decision previously made. So media coverage over a long period of time — over the period '74 to '79 — had created an image of Trudeau. I think everyone would agree that this was a referendum on Trudeau, positive or negative. And the media had a lot to do with making people aware of the negative aspects of his leadership. So in the long run you could say that the media played a significant role in the election outcome, especially in English Canada. But it is not immediate. It is not possible for the parties or for a conspiracy of newspaper editors to manipulate the election. The long term process of news selection is what seems to make the difference. The well known hostility of the Press Gallery to Pierre Trudeau gradually influenced the public over a long period of time.

### Is there by necessity an adversarial relationship between politicians and reporters?

In some respects the relationship between politicians and reporters is similar to the relationship between reporters and reporters. That is a combination of co-operation and competition. Political reporters need politicians. Politicians are their main sources. Politicians are the colourful people they report on. Without them, they can't do anything.

On the other hand, politicians — at least to be significant nationally, to go beyond just being powerful in their own constituency — need the press. So there is a relationship of co-operation — each uses the other to fulfil their varied objectives. They have different objectives, but they can co-operate to achieve both of them. They can only achieve them through co-operation.

But, journalists gain reputations in large part by exposing weaknesses in the political system and by exposing failures of individual politicians. This was true before Watergate, but it has obviously been substantially increased by Watergate. As a consequence journalists are not only looking to co-operate with politicians, but to expose their faults as well. Politicians never get enough good copy. They are never fully satisfied with what is written about them or said about them. So there is a built in tension, so there obviously is always an adversary relationship as well. But it is a curious combination of co-operation and adversarial interaction.

### Is there a problem of mixing analysis with reporting? Should analysis be identified as analysis?

I am old-fashioned enough to think so. Reporting is always going to have some analysis in it because you can't just isolate facts. Objectivity is really impossible. You have to make some judgements about which facts are important and how they should link together in a story. But I think you can make a distinction between that and analysis which involves a greater subjective aspect, and you can keep those separate. I think that is desirable.

There is not much problem now in the print media. The newspapers are generally making it pretty clear what is opinion, what is analysis and what is factual reporting. Factual reporting increasingly is more sophisticated and that means that it does involve more of a subjective element.

Increasingly, in television you are finding much more opinionated reporting. I'm not opposed to opinionated reporting, but I think it would be nice if the reporters were given a little more time to explain the basis for their opinions.

### Do you feel that some nationally syndicated reporters are biased in favour of one party? Some people suggest that Richard Gwyn is biased in favour of the Liberals. Others point to Doug Fisher's past as an NDP backbencher.

Sure. I think most political reporters, if they are worth anything, have political opinions. If their political opinions tend to coincide with the opinions of one party or another, they will be inclined to lean towards that party. But most of them are pretty independent of the parties they might be associated with. They criticize the parties even though they might support them.

### Does the press have a responsibility to the country it operates in? Should the Dieppe affair have been reported at the time as a disaster on the part of military leaders? Could this have hurt morale if it was accurately reported?

That's a difficult question. On the whole I would say that even though most news organizations are private corporations — with the exception of the CBC and Radio Canada — they do have an obligation to the public.

Part of their obligation is to inform the public of failures in the political system — bad decisions and so on. But when a society is fighting for its survival the rules change slightly. Someone has to make some decision about what will affect morale and what will affect the capacity of the country to survive.

There is no question that a hard-headed, tough-minded look at things like Dieppe after the fact is important, so they won't be repeated. Whether that kind of exposure journalism has to be done immediately after the fact, when nothing can be done anyway to save the situation, but might have other damaging effects — I don't know really that answer to that question. You would have to look at it on a case by case basis.