

# Politician is influenced by journalist

by Dianne Kenny

"Why do politicians make poor journalists?" Jeffrey Simpson asked Friday afternoon at a Political Science Undergraduate Association forum on campus.

Simpson, *Globe and Mail* columnist and CBC commentator, continued with the flip side of this question — why journalists make poor politicians.

Although high calibre journalists and high level politicians share many of the same interests through their concern over public policy, there are major differences. Even though both seem, in the end, to be skeptical and cynical about the process they observe and practice.

But with a few exceptions, as Simpson argued, "one does not function well in the milieu of the other." Ironically, however, one cannot exist without the other in a liberal democratic society.

Much of the responsibility for maintaining a healthy relationship falls upon the journalist. Simpson called upon all journalists to have "open eyes" in order to see things "in the round".

This translates as a challenge to remain neither friend nor foe of practicing politicians.

Simpson said a journalist must earn respect if he or she wishes to have access to information sources.

Above all, Simpson stressed, it is essential that a journalist have a solid knowledge of the issue, in both its contemporary aspects and its historical foundation.

If a politician senses the journalist is less than knowledgeable, he or she will lose respect and begin to "play public relations".

The concern of a politician for his image is partly a factor of the growing influence which television has upon politics. The public relations package designed to sell the politician is aimed at an undecided audience with a short attention span.

By focussing upon what they feel the public wants to see they risk providing false or misleading information, as well as missing the good or relevant factors involved.

Politicians become "soap salesmen," Simpson said.

Furthermore, the politician has to live with the consequences of his actions: he is concerned with where the chips fall.

The opposite is true for the journalist. He is "responsible ultimately only to himself," said Simpson.

Unless the journalist commits a slander or a libel, he does not have to live with the consequences of what is written.

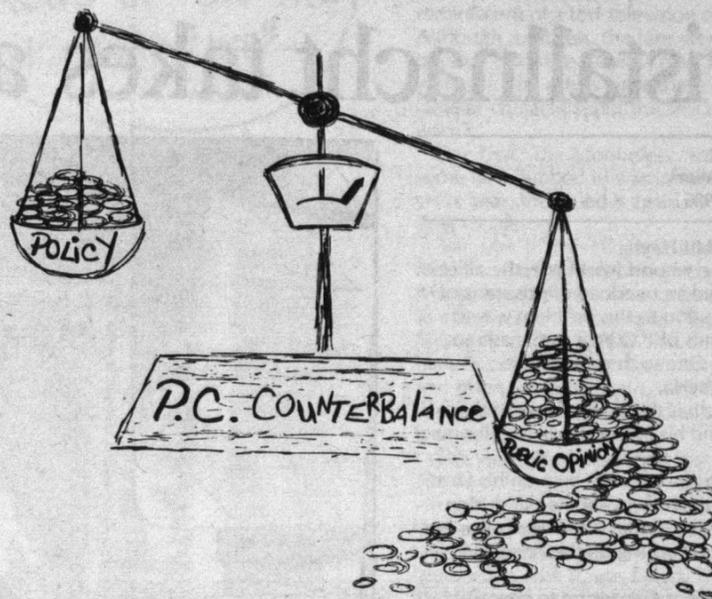
This is part of the inherent tension between the politicians and the media — between power and

influence.

Jeffrey Simpson obtained his B.A. (Hons.) at Queen's University and his M.A. at the London School of Economics, both in Political Science.

He visited the Department of

Political Science at the University of Alberta last week and participated in seminars on issues such as free trade, politics, polls and public opinion, as well as media and politicians.



# Simpson skeptical of opinion polls

by Brad Johnson

Toronto political columnist Jeffrey Simpson gave a lecture on "Politics, Polls, and Public Opinion," hosted by the Department of Political Science in the Tory Building last Thursday.

Simpson, of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, said "learning to live with polls is one of political journalism's greatest challenges."

He said, "easy accessibility of polling data emboldens all journalists to become instant pundits, or worse still, experts." This despite polls being "nothing more than snapshots" of public opinion.

Pollsters will report a certain margin of error in their findings while this margin is "systematically ignored by the media," he said. "All you will hear are the so called headline numbers, which . . . can be grossly misleading, if not dead wrong," Simpson added.

Politicians, too, Simpson told the half-filled lecture theatre, are especially influenced by polls. He said "political polling has now reached a stage of considerable sophistication."

"I believe if there's any effect that polls generally produce, it is to reinforce timidity in those who use them," he said, referring to politicians commissioning polls for policy decisions. "Polling results often reveal, at best, a deep ambivalence about change, and at worst, a blind aversion to it."

Simpson said the rise in the influence of polls roughly matches a decline in respect for leaders using them to make decisions. As examples, he cited bilingualism, patriation of the constitution, and abolition of capital punishment, bills that went against the numbers. But they won politicians' "grudging respect, whereas many policies with the numbers merely lead politicians in circles."

Of the present federal government, Simpson said Alan Greg of the Decima Research polling firm told him "he never worked for anyone who hangs on polls as much as Prime Minister Mulroney." According to Tory party polls after their victorious 1984 election, Canadians had an overwhelming desire for change, Simpson said. However, "when the pollsters probed for what kind of change the country wanted, they ran up against that deep ambivalence."

Commenting on the rising influence of polls in our society, he said,

"the gospel according to Gallup," once the only polling firm, "now is simply one among many."

Shortly before ending his lecture and answering audience questions,

Simpson said, "I plead, then, for more rigour by journalists in handling polls, for more modesty in the claims made by pollsters for their material, for greater skepti-

cism on the part of consumers of polling data, for more widespread understanding of the limits and liabilities of polls."

Jeffrey Simpson has been writing for the *Globe and Mail* since 1973, and beginning 1984 has appeared on CBC's *Sunday Report*.

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