

A Journalist's Perspective on Electoral Reform

D A N L E T T †

I was a little put off when they asked a journalist to appear at the conference because my perspective is a little less about the broader macro improvements that you could make to the voting system and more about the relationship between the voters, government, and politicians and where the media falls in between.

I do speak a fair bit on political reporting. People ask me what good political reporting is and certainly it is to be knowledgeable about public policy, about issues like electoral reform. But it's also a human endeavour. You have to understand the people, you have to understand the sacrifices they make to be involved, their motivations. I like to tell people that really, really good political reporting is being able to sit across from someone in a position of power, and being able to ask them what colour their underwear is with a straight face.

I see these people more than I see my wife. I see Gord Macintosh more than I see my wife or children. When the Legislature is in session it becomes an interesting social interaction. Getting close to people in politics like that does give you a perspective on the electorate.

We've had two fascinating elections in the last year and a half or so: the 2003 provincial election here in Manitoba, and the 2004 federal election. Quick show of hands, how many people voted in the last federal election? If this room were representative, 20% of you, just lied.

After the 2003 provincial election, which had a record low voter turnout (54%) we did a follow-up poll involving fairly intensive questioning. What we found was that about 75% of the people we polled said they voted. I think this is actually quite demonstrative of some of the problems that people in government and politics and the media have trying to engage people in talking about, reading, and participating in politics. And I think that's really the point: electoral reform is going to

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mean very little, unless it becomes a way of engaging people in the political process—and I'm not sure that it is.

So what do the poll results tell us? On the one hand, we have people (we know from phone calls and letters that we get) that have high expectations of politicians and government; they are quick to judge and blame, and they have a fairly healthy fascination with public institutions and public officials. On the other hand, they don't respect the work that politicians and people in public institutions do; they are dismissive of politics and politicians. They don't participate in the public process. Very few of you, if you were allowed to, probably would participate with a political party or movement.

So if you're in government or politics, what do you do to engage people? Premier Gary Doer blamed the low voter turnout on what he called “a perfect storm of conditions”. This is from the 2003 election: he said there was advanced polling that so probed the electorate, that the landslide was so obviously going to happen, that people stayed back and didn't vote. There was a lack of competition in Manitoba. We have two opposition parties that are essentially rebuilding, and a government that was training for this job for 11 years (and they have shown themselves to be fairly good at governing). And an indifferent media: *The Winnipeg Free Press* was the only media outlet in Manitoba to actually travel outside the perimeter highway to cover the provincial election with all three party leaders.

Now before you start blaming *The Winnipeg Free Press* or other members of the media for not being more engaged, this really has a lot to do with how much people want to hear about politics. People have lost interest in politics, and they lose interest in elections—why? There is a strong anti-politician movement. I call them the anti-politician politicians. These are people that debase politicians and government to get elected. It is a strong current of the populace to western political movements: “we are not them, we are us, we are part of you, and we are going to go and we are going to kick them out (and then we are going to become them, but we're not going to tell you about it later).”

Does anybody remember the Reform Party eventually coming around to the idea that the MPs' pension plan was a good idea? And I don't know whether it is a function of ignorance or just political opportunism. This translates into the anti-politician journalists. These are people that feel that politicians are responsible for every problem; they have no redeeming qualities: they don't deserve a pay raise, they don't deserve a pension plan. Apparently, people are supposed to drop whatever they're doing and work for a fairly long time in politics, receive no remuneration of any kind, no legacy, and certainly no respect for the work that they're doing.

This is particularly problematic for me because I think that good political analysis from a journalist discusses both sides of an issue, or multi-sides of an issue. You don't just leap on a government or a politician for something when you really know that there's another side to it.

A columnist in the city recently wrote a column actually asking that someone lay criminal charges against the Finance Minister of Manitoba, for keeping two sets of books. Well, the two sets of books are a function of an act of the legislature of Manitoba: there is the balanced budget law—that requires one set of books. There is the comprehensive summary budget of the government—that requires a different set of books. It's the law of the land, but apparently, the columnist thinks you ought to lay criminal charges. This is not encouraging people to go out and cast votes, and it's intellectually dishonest. And it's just a “silly bugger” approach to journalism, and it makes me really upset.

The politicians themselves, though, are often responsible for this debasement in the way they approach campaigning and elections. The NDP promised to end hallway medicine in 1999 (this one is often debated). If you actually get somebody from the health-care system, stop them and ask them if they think it's a good idea that they not be allowed to put people in hallways they'll tell you that it's a bad idea. The woman who goes into hospital because she needs a shot of Demerol to pass a gall stone: do you want to pay \$1,500 a day to put her in a hospital room or do you want to put her in a hallway for two hours to make sure that she has passed a gall stone and she is safe to drive home. Apparently that practical analysis didn't make its way into the 1999 provincial election. As a result, they are the government that failed to end hallway medicine. And the opposition is in the unenviable position of criticising them for failing to end hallway medicine, but they won't go as far as to say that they would do it too.

This also translates into our understanding of political scandal. Quite frankly, the media generates scandal out of fairly mundane issues because we are bored with what's going on, and because we've basically lost interest, or our editors have lost interest, or more importantly, the readers have lost interest in discussions of public policy. So what do we get? We get things like Shawinigate. The Prime Minister had a conversation where he asked somebody in government to give small consideration to a government agency lending money back to a hotel where he once owned a small share, but got out of the business arrangement. You know, I'm left to wonder where the smoke is? If there's no smoke, there's no fire. This dominated before the 1997 federal election, and there really wasn't much there. But prior to that there had been almost nothing in terms of public policy to report on in Ottawa, so we needed something to dig our heels into.

All of this combines in my mind to something that I like to call the narrow band of ideology for governing parties. (And this is where we get the government that we deserve.) Governing parties are very good at probing the public through polling, focus groups, through their own party machinery. They know what we are telling them we think is important. The problem is that what we tell them is important isn't always what we really think is important, so the result is we make virtually no progress on major files.

The most important speech, the Prime Minister is giving right now is not the one about the democratic deficit, it is the one about the dangers of incrementalism and no one's reporting on it. Simply put, he's pointing out that we've been so focused in government on giving people what they say they want that we don't actually make any progress on what we think they need. This has become a really distasteful debate because it violates the grassroots movements of the party; it doesn't respond to the electorate. Some people even think that telling people what they need or doing things that you think they need is part of the democratic deficit itself. So they're not governing as much as they're trying to stay in power, and I see this on a regular basis.

Think of the middle-class tax cut: it cost hundreds of millions of dollars. In Manitoba, the middle-class tax cut gives somebody making more than \$60,000 a year a \$600 tax break, and it doesn't pull any body out of poverty, and it really doesn't give anybody any more money to go and spend in their disposable income. So in the end, is that encouraging people to get involved in the political debate? I don't think so.

I think that basically the public has become estranged from government. This is where I think they really do part of their public policy, and the development of it is really working against the motivation of the electorate.

The Federal government has consistently for seven years now flouted all attempts to have the *Federal Access to Information* law actually applied the way it was intended. *The Winnipeg Free Press* wrote stories about a Federal Cabinet minister that spent Cabinet funds on a leadership campaign. We tracked it right down to where the Access to Information Commissioner admitted that records had been destroyed in the Minister's office to cover up tens of thousands of dollars of spending. Has anybody heard the story? No, because the Winnipeg Free Press wrote it and nobody else picked up.

That leaves my last point, which is that we have no national political economy in the media any more. It used to be that we reported the news of the nation. The Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star had correspondents in Winnipeg that filed daily dispatches out of the Manitoba legislature.

Now, literally, you have to have an Al Qaeda plane land on Princess Diana at Portage and Main to get somebody to run a story from Winnipeg. So what we now run are stories that are important on a national basis, and those stories are really, really (and I know that this sounds like such a regional Homer thing) but it really is about stories that are important to people in Ottawa, where there is an entire culture—all the way up from the aides of the politicians talking about how important they are and how great things are in Ottawa. (I've talked to aides to western ministers who don't know how many seats there are in Manitoba. That is pretty sad.)

So I'd just like to say, when you're thinking about electoral reform, if you can, please translate some of the grey matter into figuring out ways how to get people excited about politics, because proportional representation is not selling more newspapers for sure. And I don't think it's going to make more people come out and vote.

Thank you.

