

# Bringing the voters back in: a Canadian model for Australia?

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In 1993 federal elections were held in Australia and Canada alike. Whereas a complacent Australian media framed their coverage of the 1993 campaign in ways which cast voters in the role of passive consumers of politics, the Canadian news media experimented with various inclusive strategies which were intended to install ordinary Canadians at the very centre of their election coverage. The most publicised of these laudable experiments involved a series of television town hall meetings carried by the CBC's *Prime Time* news program. The Canadian media's innovative coverage demonstrates that it is possible to approach elections as something more than a contest between leaders and parties, and to see campaigns as a public discourse in which ordinary voters can be given a voice. It is in this sense that the media coverage of the 1993 Canadian election offers Australian news and current affairs journalists a model for a fresh, more inclusive and democratic approach to reporting election campaigns in this country.

**E**VEN although David Sless (1993, p.61) finds "nothing new" in their treatment of the campaign, it is not entirely true that the news media approached the 1993 Australian election as business-as-usual. After all, this was the campaign in which Channel 9 unveiled a "worm" which see-sawed its way

across TV screens to reveal the immediate reactions of a studio group of uncommitted voters to the points which the Prime Minister and Opposition leader made during their formal debate encounters. It was also the campaign when the Nine *Sunday* program ventured to give Labor's Senator Graham Richardson and the Liberals' John Howard a weekly spot, ostensibly to analyse their foes' unfolding campaigns, and in practice to press their party lines. However, like the worm, this innovation added little. For the most part news and current affairs coverage of the campaign, even where news organisations opted to keep a respectable distance from the parties' determined efforts to mould the news, amounted to more of the same. It is therefore not surprising, after examining the television news and current affairs coverage of the 1993 election, that Bell and Boehringer (1993, p.12) should suggest that there appears to have been "a consolidation and extension of the processes" which they first observed 13 years before in their study of media coverage of the 1980 election.

Of course, it is Bell and Boehringer's thesis that, on the one hand, television news and current affairs alike paint policy issues as highly complex and decipherable only via the on-screen interventions of reporters and "expert" commentators such as economists. On the other hand, the news emphasises the adversarial nature of politics. In each of these ways television constructs politics as a "charade" against which it can "define its own legitimacy in contrast". Television news and current affairs treat elections as spectacles of entertainment, as dramatic battles between parties and their leaders. In so doing television removes citizens from the contest, and in catching them up in the drama of the campaign, robs them of the capacity to decide or even reflect on the policy issues at stake. The kernel of Bell and Boehringer's thesis is that television treats its viewers as passive spectators, indeed "as *consumers* of party politics" (Bell and Boehringer 1993, p.12). In essence, the complaint is that the television coverage of election contests leaves voters out of the picture. However, much the same argument might be made about the manner in which radio and the press report elections. These

news media also mostly treat elections as contests between leaders and parties rather than as opportunities for citizens to flag issues of concern to them.

It is noteworthy that during the 1993 election it was the Liberal Party and not the news media which attempted to push ordinary Australians to the centre-stage. The high point of the Liberals' February 24 official campaign launch was the introduction of a series of "ordinary" Australians whom the then Opposition Leader, Dr Hewson, introduced as "victims" of his opponents' policies. Of course, Liberal strategists were not going to allow ordinary Australians to hijack their campaign agenda. Rather, they wanted to put a human face on the otherwise dry, economically focused *Fightback!* policy package. Those citizens introduced by Hewson as "victims" of 10 years of Labor neglect had each been carefully selected. Their appearance at the Liberal rally was carefully orchestrated with the wider television audience in mind. And as a campaign ploy it probably failed. Journalists and commentators attacked it as a contrived stunt, and even declared that "ordinary" Australians looked out of place in an otherwise slick television production which resembled an extended political commercial. The *Telegraph Mirror's* senior political reporter at the time, Amanda Buckley, wrote that their "authenticity" rendered them "out of place at what started off as a glitzy artificial Liberal launch" (see Hirst 1993, p.38).

The tenor of responses such as Buckley's, and the immediate media scramble to vet the credentials of the five "ordinary" citizens paraded by the Liberals, suggests an underlying assumption among journalists and editors is that ordinary voters actually have no place on centre-stage in an election campaign. In this context it is noteworthy that David Sless (1993, p.61) argues that the very reason that election campaigns have become so boring is because the media (and parties) have progressively excluded citizens from the electoral process. Sless (1993, p.61) himself berates the media for its boring news coverage of the 1993 federal election and willingness to endlessly regurgitate "the same old election cliches". But he also identifies as a problem the similar willingness of communication researchers to con-

tinually recycle their well-worn criticisms of political communication! It is time, he suggests, to look at “alternative structures and modes of communication” (Sless 1993, p.66). If we take his provocation seriously, then we need do more than complain that the news coverage of federal elections reworks the same tired themes, or that it effectively marginalises voters. Instead we need turn our attention to modes of communication – to journalistic practices – which might bring the voters back in.

### **An alternative, Canadian model**

In 1993 a federal election was also held in Canada. In reporting that election the mainstream Canadian media adopted a number of sometimes quite innovative strategies designed to put ordinary Canadians at the centre of the campaign coverage. These ranged from establishing panels of voters to regularly comment on the campaign in print and on radio, through to televising a series of town hall meetings in which voters were able to extensively question prominent politicians. It is true that these efforts did not displace more conventional media coverage of the activities and pronouncements of party leaders which nowadays in Canada (as in Australia) is the stuff from which much election news is fashioned. Nor were all the different strategies for bringing voters back into the campaign story equally successful. Nonetheless, initiatives such as televised town hall meetings did take media coverage of the 1993 Canadian election a considerable step beyond “disdaining the news” (Blumler 1990, p.108) by occasionally writing about and laying bare the parties’ various efforts to “stage manage” the news (which thus far has been the chief response of Australian editors and reporters to the determined efforts of political strategists to control the campaign agenda). In this paper I argue that despite their flaws, these Canadian experiments with citizen-centred forms of election coverage constitute an example of “international best practice” to which Australian editors and journalists might usefully look for an alternative model.

No doubt the efforts which the Canadian media made in 1993

to bring the voter back into their campaign coverage were encouraged by the "increased participation from citizens through town hall meetings, call-ins, and interactive technology" (Kenner Muir 1994, p.227) which had been a feature of the 1992 US presidential campaign. But they must also be set in a distinctly Canadian context, against both the background of the previous 1988 Canadian election and against the 1991 report of the (Lortie) Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. The 1988 Canadian campaign has been described as an especially dramatic, divisive election (Levine 1993, p.344). It was also a campaign which on the one hand demonstrated "the awesome power of television to control an election agenda", and, on the other, that the ruling Tory party and its leader had perfected the art of evading scrutiny and steering the news by supplying the sound bites and visuals required by television (Levine 1993, p.350). Against this background it is not surprising that Lortie and his co-commissioners found that "[i]n recent years, there has been considerable criticism of news coverage of election campaigns" (RCERPF 1991, p.471).

A common complaint about media coverage of the 1988 and other recent Canadian elections is that it has been superficial. Lortie heard arguments that "[c]overage in the mainstream media presents a limited range of perspectives, focuses on the leaders of the larger parties at the expense of local candidates and other spokespeople and often fails to put campaign events in context" (RCERPF 1991, p.472). Perhaps not surprisingly in view of the assiduous efforts of political parties and others to shape the ways in which elections are reported, the Royal Commission concluded that the news media alone were not responsible for the "weaknesses of news coverage of Canadian election campaigns". After all, the parties, their pollsters and campaign strategists also had a hand in deciding the issue content and form of presentation of campaign news (RCERPF 1991, p.479).

In casting about for a practical solution, Lortie turned to the example of the conference of party strategists, journalists and media scholars which the CBC and Queen's University had convened in the wake of the 1988 election to review the Canadian

news media's coverage of that campaign and its evident shortcomings. Indeed, the Royal Commission formally recommended that bodies such as the Canadian Journalism Foundation run regular seminars on campaign coverage; and that the Canadian Association of Journalists should continue, and that other media organisations should initiate, the practice of holding post-election evaluations of the media's campaign coverage (RCERPF 1991, p.480). The various initiatives taken by the Canadian news media in an effort to inject the views of ordinary Canadians into the coverage of the 1993 election, and to prevent the parties and their "spin doctors" from controlling the media agenda during the campaign, appear to owe much to an industry consultation process of the kind prescribed by Lortie and his fellow Commissioners. For example, in anticipation of the 1993 election the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation convened several in-house conferences in which its producers consulted media scholars and other outsiders, and from which its eventual decision to conduct a series of television town halls was born.

### **Television town halls and other inclusive strategies**

Of course, in North America the town hall meeting is a traditional symbol of democracy. During 1992 the idea that town hall meetings might be revived and reinvigorated by modern communication technology had been popularised by J. Ross Perot and the publicity given to his quixotic campaign for the US presidency. In Canada the CBC, whose brief as the national broadcaster is to "present the widest possible range of ideas" (Taras 1990, p.7), decided that its coverage of the 1993 federal campaign would include a weekly series of four nationally televised election town halls. These were conceived of as an opportunity for small groups of about 50 ordinary Canadians (who had been carefully selected by a market research company) to enter into a dialogue with a panel of politicians representing each of the major parties and various of their rivals. These panels typically comprised influential frontbenchers and other prominent politi-

cians (rather than the Prime Minister or Opposition leader, who obtain extensive media coverage in the normal course of events). Each election town hall was broadcast in conjunction with – and in the extended timeslot of – the CBC's *Prime Time* mid-evening news program. The first (broadcast on Monday October 18) took up the issue of the accountability of politicians and the breakdown of public faith in the Canadian political system. Subsequent Monday night town halls canvassed identifiable election issues such as employment and the economy.

CBC's election town halls attracted considerable publicity. But they were in fact just one device used by the news media to inject the voices of ordinary Canadians into the election. Recent Canadian elections have seen the institutionalisation of televised debates (in French and English) between rival party leaders. For the 1993 English language debate a market research firm assembled an audience of 86 voters representing "a microcosm of Canadian demographics, geography, income, marital status, family composition and so on" (Lee 1993). In a novel twist, at least for Canada, the participating leaders were asked to field questions from this audience of voters as well as from a panel of journalists. The direct involvement of an audience was also seen as a check upon the influence of spin doctors who in previous elections had been deployed "to talk up their candidates' performance and talk down the achievements of the others" in order to skew post-debate analysis. This time round the studio in which the leaders' conducted their debate was declared a spin doctor-free zone in the hope that the reactions of the studio audience rather than of the party strategists would shape the media's "instant" post-debate analysis of the leaders' performances (*Globe and Mail*, September 6, 1993).

Immediately after the debate the *Newsworld* CBC cable television news network conducted a talk-back program, taking calls and hearing views from across Canada. Indeed, throughout the campaign *Newsworld* held regular phone-ins. For example, its Sunday *On the Line* program assembled a panel of parliamentary candidates representing various parties and invited viewers across Canada to call collect where they had particular questions

to put to the politicians. This same program prefaced commercial breaks with brief “vox pop” segments compiled from grabs obtained from questioning Canadians-in-the-street. Other television programs also explored talk-back, even although conventional wisdom holds that “talking (listening?) heads” make poor TV. For instance CTV’s *AM* morning program conducted periodic phone-ins to give its audience a voice in the campaign coverage.

Television news and current affairs also pursued other innovative strategies for involving voters. Thus the CBC’s network news (as it routinely does) invited its audience to fax or phone their comments on its news coverage and then included these in a weekly “Your Turn” segment. And for the period of the election the CBC’s 9 o’clock evening *Prime Time News* program included a special segment which it dubbed “The Voters’ Voice”. For these, specially selected audiences were assembled and asked to evaluate particular campaign events (such as the leaders’ debate, party advertising or even an election town hall broadcast). The reactions of particular audience groups (such as undecided voters, partisans, women, or unemployed Canadians) were gauged using an on-screen graphing technique (in the fashion of *Nine’s* “worm”). But these “Voters’ Voice” segments also included small discussion groups modelled on the focus groups that party strategists use to gauge the ebb and flow of public opinion. This provided another opportunity for voters to comment on the election on prime time national television.

Other news media chose different means of inviting ordinary voters in. For example, the influential Toronto *Sun* newspaper revisited an old idea and empanelled 18 uncommitted voters and regularly obtained and reported their assessments of the unfolding campaign. Other newspapers, such as the Vancouver *Sun*, did likewise, tracking a panel of seven Vancouver voters during the campaign. Canada’s national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, assembled a “group of representative Canadian voters from Winnipeg in the centre of the country” and for six weeks regularly reported their reactions to the unfolding campaign. It also ran a regular “vox populi” page in which it presented thumbnail



sketches of the thoughts and opinions of Canadians-in-the-street in different towns and regions. And in a similar vein it supplemented the findings of its various opinion polls with the more detailed comments of selected respondents (because the “cool statistics of a public-opinion poll” don’t always reflect the depth of public feeling).

Pursuing a rather different inclusive strategy, the Vancouver *Sun* and other newspapers in the Southam chain invited their readers to write in with the questions they would like to ask the party leaders. Southam reporters then asked those questions, and each day published the leaders’ answers in an “Ask the Leader” column. In yet another variation, *Maclean’s* magazine in association with CTV invited 12 Canadians to a weekend in a hotel and invited them to hammer out a mock budget (in an experiment which demonstrated the difficulties of cutting back government spending without damaging sectional interests). In a number of instances radio followed the example of the press and established panels of uncommitted or typical voters. For example, the host of CBC radio’s *Almanac* afternoon show in British Columbia regularly consulted a panel of undecided voters to obtain their reactions to events such as the leaders’ debates. As well, both CBC regional radio and commercial stations used talk-back formats which provided their listeners with opportunities to comment on the election.

### **Keeping spin doctors at bay**

Underlying the considerable efforts the various Canadian news and current affairs media made to include the voices of Canadian voters in their 1993 election coverage was a determination not to be ensnared by the parties’ efforts to manage the news (as the Tories had been able to in 1988). Prior to the campaign the networks and major news organisations had even considered refusing to assign reporters to accompany the leaders on the “tours” which lie at the heart of each party’s calculations for controlling news coverage of their campaigns. In the end they all relented and did dispatch reporters to accompany the party

leaders on their travels across Canada. However, most major news organisations (as in previous elections) regularly rotated reporters between the various leader's tours. Most continued the practice of "disdaining the news" — of publicising the parties' efforts to manipulate the news. In some cases news organisations made some quite surprising decisions intended to ensure that aspects of their campaign coverage retained a safe distance from the parties' spin doctors — for example by assigning individual reporters to cover the election entirely from within the confines of a single seat such as the Vancouver Central riding.

Several news organisations determined that they would closely scrutinise the parties' various policy claims and promises, perhaps inspired by the "ad watch" segments which US television news had run during the 1992 presidential campaign in an effort to hold candidates accountable for claims made in their television advertising (see Pfau and Loudon 1994, or Wicks and Kern 1995). In this vein the *Globe and Mail* periodically included an occasional "Reality Check" column in which it sought to provide detailed background analysis to help readers assess particular policy issues, and to a lesser extent to hold up statements made by leaders against the record of their earlier pronouncements. (The latter has been made a relative straightforward task by the computerisation of newspapers, which allows journalists to trawl through data bases constructed from past issues.) CBC's *Prime Time News* hour-long program included an occasional, similar "Reality Watch" segment.

In an effort to shift the focus away from the national campaign and the contrived activities of the leaders, many newspapers provided a series of detailed surveys of the campaign and issues of local concern in key ridings. Television followed suite. For example, the CBC's *Prime Time News* program also included an occasional "Campaign Close-up" segment, which variously examined the campaign in particular regions or even individual ridings. It is true that as the 1993 election unfolded, both print and broadcast news organisations were forced to pay particular attention to Canada's regions, since in the west the Reform Party, and in Quebec, the Bloc Quebecois, rapidly emerged as major

political forces and not the lesser players they had been assumed to be at the beginning. Thus it was the rise of Reform and the Bloc and not just a desire to stand aside from the national campaign fought between the leaders which caused CBC to send reporters to different regions such as the Maritimes, Quebec and Western Canada during the last weeks of the campaign. Nonetheless, the result was a series of extended news reports which provided a sketch of the very different regional campaigns being fought — campaign close-up reports which augmented rather than displaced coverage of the leaders and the national campaign. CTV's *News Hour* did likewise, dispatching reporters to cover the campaign in Quebec and in the west when it became apparent that the Bloc and Reform were looming as major political forces in these regions.

It should be noted that most of the news coverage of the 1993 Canadian election campaign was a matter of business-as-usual. The major parties went to unprecedented lengths to manage the media coverage of their campaigns (Dornan 1994, p.83). For their part, journalists and editors did not forego their fascination with who was winning the "horse race", nor their preoccupation with what the leaders said and did. Neither did they pass up proffered "photo-ops" and "sound bites", and the opportunity to seize upon slip-ups made by the leaders on the campaign trail. It would be clearly wrong to suggest that coverage of the 1993 election was fundamentally different from the leader-focused coverage of previous Canadian federal campaigns. Nonetheless, the media did weave a new thread into the tapestry. Burnt by their experience in 1988; provoked by the Royal Commission's comments on the inadequacy of news coverage of elections; and aware of very high levels of public cynicism about politics; in 1993 the Canadian news media experimented with strategies which might shift the focus of election news away from the leaders, restrict the opportunities of the spin doctors to massage the news, and instead give voters a greater voice. As the CBC executive producer responsible for the televised election debates, Arnold Amber, said, with the innovative format allowing audience members to question the leaders in mind, "It's all part of a differ-

ent way of looking at things, about who's involved in public discourse" (*Globe and Mail*, September 6, 1993).

### **Obstacles to applying the Canadian model?**

During the 1993 Canadian campaign many broadcast and print journalists did seek to differently look at the question of who should be involved in public discourse. Canadian media experimented with a variety of mechanisms for including the voices of ordinary Canadians in their campaign coverage. Not all these experiments proved entirely successful. But the innovative approach taken in an effort to include the voice of ordinary Canadians in media coverage of the 1993 election campaign does offer a model for Australian broadcasters and newswriters. However, I do not argue that the Australian media should uncritically replicate the electronic town halls, voter panels, focus groups and other methods devised by the Canadian media to include the voices of ordinary Canadians. To begin with, there are sufficient differences between the Australian and Canadian political and media systems to suggest that some of these inclusive practices might not readily be transplanted. Both Australia and Canada have federal and Westminster-derived and thus similar political systems. Even so there are significant differences.

Canadian politics are highly regional. Historically, important regionally based politicians have long played a key role in election campaigns. Hence Canadians are accustomed to, and the established parties are happy for, politicians other than the leader taking a leading role during an election campaign. Australian political parties will be much more anxious to keep the focus on their leader. Indeed, during the 1993 election Liberal frontbenchers were dispatched to their own constituencies lest they draw attention away from Dr Hewson or advance arguments or claims which might fuel media stories about divisions within the party. Canadian parties have traditionally allowed lieutenants to speak on behalf of party leaders. But in Australia parties which speak with multiple voices during an election run the risk of being painted as unable to govern their own house, let alone the coun-

try. Here is a subtle difference in the political cultures of each country which suggests that Canadian-style election town halls might not easily be transplanted.

A further problem is that the Australian party system is essentially bi-polar in that it pits the ALP against the Coalition parties. In Canada in 1993 five separate parties were represented on the panels of politicians which the CBC assembled for its election town halls. However, in the Australian context Labor is certain to decline to participate on a panel on which each Coalition party is separately represented. And neither major party is likely to agree to minor parties (such as the Democrats or Greens) appearing as equals on a televised panel, because this might boost their public standing. Again, the point is that the election town hall which worked well enough in the context of the 1993 Canadian election is unlikely to be easily transposed into an Australian party environment which is essentially bi-polar and more sharply adversarial. The general argument about the difficulty of merely imitating Canadian practice can be extended. For example, the two major Australian political parties run tighter, more centrally controlled campaigns (Ward 1994). Hence they are likely to be more skilled than their Canadian counterparts in "stacking" the queues of callers to talk-back shows with their own supporters. As a result, even where stations attempt to screen out partisan callers, the talk-back format can provide another forum for party warfare rather than a genuine opportunity for ordinary Australians to inject their voices into the campaign.

Furthermore, the inclusive strategies developed or rediscovered by the Canadian media to cover the 1993 campaign may not all be readily transplanted because Australia has a different media system. For instance, (as yet) there is no Australian equivalent of the CBC *Newsworld* cable channel and thus there are fewer opportunities to experiment with innovative forms of election coverage. The commercial free-to-air networks are highly unlikely to willingly disrupt their regular program schedules to carry an extended election coverage. Moreover, there is a long-standing industry aversion to "talking heads" television. This, together with the legacy of the Sydney radio talk-back host

Alan Jones' short-lived venture into current affairs television in early 1994 fresh in mind, must mean that Australian television producers will not be easily persuaded to incorporate an element of talk-back into their election coverage (even although radio stations successfully use this format and it has been successfully used by the CBC in Canada and the C-SPAN cable network in the USA for some years.) Perhaps more to the point, there appears to be no widespread concern amongst editors and journalists that the media coverage of Australian federal elections does have shortcomings. Critics tend to be academics standing outside of the news media, and there is no professional or other forum (such as the Queen's University seminars) to bring newswriters and their critics together and to provide journalists with an opportunity to collectively consider how else they might report on election campaigns.

### Some flaws in the glass?

The practical obstacles to imitating innovative Canadian practices to one side, there is the separate, broader question of whether televised town halls and the like actually do usefully involve voters in public discourse. Clearly the Canadian proponents of these more inclusive strategies are enthusiastic about their potential. Amber, for one, believes that this different way of looking at elections has its foot firmly in the door: "All we do from now on is ask ourselves how to do it better" (*Globe and Mail*, October 9, 1993). But equally there are also Canadian journalists and media critics who have reservations. For instance, some have pointed to the *ad hoc* and ultimately unrepresentative manner in which media outlets assembled panels of ordinary Canadians. Even where market research firms painstakingly gathered together representative audiences for the CBC town halls it is likely that some Canadians — for example the aged, disabled and those not fluent in English or French — will not have been included. More *ad hoc* methods of selecting talk-back callers or typical voters are even more likely to leave systematic gaps. In the end this reservation amounts to a quibble about the failure to

use the tools of social science to include the voices of a statistically representative sample of voters. Other critics have raised more substantive questions about the media's capacity to, and the very merit of giving citizens a voice in the coverage of elections. One line of argument suggests that the involvement of ordinary Canadians in the 1993 campaign discourse was largely illusory. A second challenges the wisdom of giving voters an unfettered or un-mediated voice in public discourse.

After the 1993 election various Canadian newsmakers, party strategists and spin doctors, and invited media scholars assembled (as the Lortie Royal Commission had suggested they should) for the Queen's Forum on Media and Politics to evaluate the media coverage of the campaign. This forum was subsequently televised as a series of one-hour programs on CBC's *Newsworld* cable channel. One issue debated by participants was whether the various methods which the media had devised to include voters in the campaign coverage merely provided a facade of public participation, or, indeed, had actually enabled the genuine involvement of ordinary Canadians. It is true, as R.M. Lee suggests, that issues such as "gay rights, agriculture, and fisheries" received a hearing where they may otherwise not have (Lee 1993, A7). Yet it is equally true that many of devices used to involve voters allowed journalists and editors a considerable editorial discretion. For example, the format of "vox pop" clips and columns required careful editing. Equally, a degree of editorial control must necessarily have been exercised over the publication of selected comments made by the voters on the various panels of ordinary Canadians whom the media consulted. Editors clearly retained some discretion in selecting which of the questions that Southam reporters asked party leaders on behalf of their readers would be included. Even talk-back callers could be screened, and on air, challenged on the accuracy of their claims. In short, the voice of ordinary Canadians in the public discourse surrounding the 1993 election campaign was inevitably *mediated*.

Of course, it might be argued that where the news media invites public participation journalists have a particular responsi-

bility to mediate — to act as gate keepers and guardians of the veracity of the views and claims that are broadcast or published. This is not always easily done, especially where live-to-air broadcasting is involved. Simply put, one of the problems of inviting voters back into the campaign discourse is that they may sometimes prove unwelcome guests. Witness the difficulty which the female host of the *Newsworld* talk-back segment immediately following the English language leaders' debate had in maintaining her equanimity when a caller declared that he would be forced to choose between Reform and the Liberals since as a Christian he could not vote either for the NDP nor for the Conservatives (both lead by women) because the Bible taught that women should not be raised above men!

Of all the means of involving voters, it was the series of CBC election town halls and the segment of the leaders' television debates in which the audience asked questions which gave (some carefully selected) ordinary Canadians freest reign to speak out. And at the post-election Queen's Forum a lively discussion ensued when it was suggested that the televised town halls were "fatally flawed" because the media had surrendered its gatekeeping role. Its critics charged that the town hall format had allowed audience members to make statements which went unchallenged in the way that journalists would routinely examine and critically test claims made by politicians. Political commentator and election watcher Ron Graham suggested that it was insulting to presume that the voters involved could not withstand interrogation. He argued that by allowing people to freely vent their frustration with the political process without making some defence of the system, the election town halls had damaged rather than extended Canada's democracy. On the other hand, *Prime Time's* co-host, Peter Mansbridge, ventured the opinion that it was the job of the politicians and not the journalists involved to challenge town hall audience members who made outrageous claims. He said that the CBC had conceived of the town halls as a two-way street and when it had become apparent that the traffic was flowing in just one direction, had en-



couraged panel members to challenge inaccurate statements and claims made by audience members. In practice none did.

Like the journalists, those politicians involved in the election town halls were reluctant to bark at the public on national television. Instead, by and large, they sought to give the same kinds of measured answer that they might give to questions posed by journalists at a media conference. Often their answers failed to please audience members (who did not have the same purpose as journalists in asking questions and certainly not the same political knowledge). In a sense the politicians appearing were slow to learn the new rules of engagement which applied in these televised town hall encounters. Not so some of the invited audience. While politicians may have felt constrained by their wider TV audience and unable to rebuke questioners who asked ill-informed or simplistic questions, some participating audience members seized the opportunity to ride their hobby horse in public. The CBC town hall format included a closing segment when the invited audience was asked to comment generally on the responses of the panel of politicians to questions they had been asked. By the later election town halls in the weekly series, the invited audience members had learnt that this was their opportunity to make their own editorial statements live on national television. A number made impassioned statements on their pet cause without any regard to the topic ostensibly under debate. Typically these concluding discussions ended on a downbeat note, with a succession of speakers asserting that politicians of all kinds were out of touch with ordinary Canadians.

### **Lessons for the Australian news media?**

At the end of an election in which the Canadian news media made unprecedented efforts to involve voters, whether the media can – and whether they ought – give unfettered access to the voices of ordinary Canadians remain unresolved questions. Nonetheless, the various inclusive strategies

adopted by the media to put ordinary Canadians back in the picture clearly added a dimension to news coverage of the 1993 Canadian federal election which was entirely missing from coverage of the Australian campaign. Herein there is a lesson for those Australian journalists and editors who are responsible for deciding how election campaigns should be reported. It is not that the Australian news media should imitate the electronic town halls, voter panels, talk-back television, focus groups and other methods devised by the Canadian media to include the voices of ordinary Canadians.

Some of these methods may well be worth experimenting with. Some – most obviously talk-back radio, vox pop interviews and the creation of panels of typical voters – have certainly been experimented with in the past (although not necessarily with a determination to build voters back into election coverage). But Australia has a different political environment into which it may not be possible to simply transplant inclusive mechanisms, even where these are judged to have worked well enough in a Canadian context. However, the chief lesson for Australian journalists and editors is that there is a “different way of looking at things”. It is indeed possible to conceive of alternative journalistic practices, and of ways of reporting elections which might include the voices of voters as well as those of the politicians, sectional interests and the expert commentators who have come to dominate public discourse in Australia.

Yet, sadly, while Canadian practice demonstrates that there are alternative, more inclusive ways of defining public discourse and of reporting election campaigns, this is a lesson which Australian journalists and editors are unlikely to heed. It is true that some Australian news workers are aware of recent north American trends in political reporting. In the latter 1980s and early 1990s Australian print media journalists did experiment with disdaining the news. The result was a smattering of stories in serious newspapers such as the *Age* and *Australian* about party pollsters, strategists and advertising agencies and their behind-the-scenes role in election campaigns. More recently some

news outlets have begun to experiment with their own "reality checks". For instance, the *Australian's* coverage of the 1995 New South Wales election incorporated an occasional column by Tom Dusevic entitled "Fact or Fiction?" in which the veracity of claims made by the competing parties was scrutinised. Such initiatives are to be welcomed. But these are more a sign that Australian journalists are moved by the fads and fashions of north American newswork. There is no determination among Australian journalists to adjust their news-gathering and reporting strategies as has begun to emerge in Canada (and also in the USA [see Wicks and Kern 1995, p.238]) as the result of debate among newswriters concerned by the political manipulation of election news processes.

There is very little evidence that those who report Australian politics are troubled by the nature of the news and current affairs coverage which federal elections receive. It is only academic commentators (like Sless, or Bell and Boehringer) who complain that the Australian news media cover elections in the same, tired old way. Judging by the public record, editors and journalists appear to share no similar sentiment. Complacency rules and Nine's "worm" counts as innovation! There is no widespread mood of disillusionment among political reporters of the kind stirred within the Canadian media by the highly manipulative 1988 Tory campaign. Moreover, there has been no Australian equivalent of the Lortie Commission to chide the Australian media for their election coverage, and to challenge them to find innovative and more inclusive ways of reporting campaigns. It may be pessimistic, but perhaps the real lesson to be taken from Canada is that the preconditions for change are not present, and that there is little immediate prospect of the Australian news and current affairs media enthusiastically adopting more inclusive ways of covering elections in this country.

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