

REFERENDUM '95: THE MEDIA'S SPECIAL ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

by Michel Vastel

There is no election or referendum that is not invariably accompanied by seminars on the role of the media. In this case, some of the questions that are being asked before the event: do the media have a special role to play and have they played that role responsibly? Those questions can be posed in a way that contributes to another important aspect of the referendum debate: can the media allow both Canada and Quebec to win? Three elements will be discussed:

- What are the "media" in issue?
- Why is their role "special"?
- What does "responsibly" mean in the circumstances?

THE MEDIA

If Quebecers are somewhat puzzled by English-Canadian leaders remaining silent in the present debate, this is certainly not the case for the "English media." They are participating—and in a very provocative way! One could quote the very respectable *Financial Post* suggesting that the Parti québécois leader Jacques Parizeau "and his bunch of highwaymen should be deposed and arrested." Or Peter C. Newman in *Maclean's* asking, "Is gunboat diplomacy the way to fight the PQ?" This is pretty heavy stuff. Why do some English-Canadian commentators have such an attitude? Very simple. As one of them put it to me: "They have a country to save!" They have a monolithic view of the issue. They do not even ask about the merits of one side or the other. Only one side is right or legitimate: theirs. So, contrary to the political leaders in the rest of the country, the English media have decided to be active players in this

debate. And their participation has an impact on Quebec because French journalists read them and report about them. As a result, the so-called Quebec media—with the notable exception of the *Montreal Gazette*—have a double balance to maintain between the ideas advanced by English-Canadian media and their own.

Quebec commentators, as much as Quebecers themselves, are equally divided between federalists and sovereigntists. Thus, each side is under the constant scrutiny of the other. Any balance is, for them, very difficult to achieve. And to measure! It may lead to such excess as keeping a log book of all interventions, measuring minutes and seconds allocated to each side and then distorting the importance of one particular side to make sure there is a balance.

There are two points to keep in mind:

- Any analysis of the Quebec media must take into account, or factor in, the role played within Quebec by such outsiders as the English-Canadian media.
- The Quebec media lack good polemicists such as Diane Francis or Peter Newman. Quebec columnists have many talents but refrain from making provocative statements because of the diverse nature of their audience. The consequence of this is the emergence of polemicists, such as Pierre Bourgaud, who are stating the obvious, but who are nevertheless pilloried. What is deemed acceptable from a columnist, or a cartoonist, is not politically correct from an individual who is

perceived as the spokesperson of one group or one party.

A "SPECIAL" ROLE?

Modern media have a propensity to "line up the radicals." It makes better copy and explains the success of open-line shows where radical statements go on air totally unedited.

Of course, in a referendum debate, both sides will appear radical. There is no place for nuances—"maybes," "on the other hands"—in such a debate. Another distinctive feature of any referendum debate is that it forecloses other legitimate debates, about the quality of the educational system or euthanasia, to name a few. Moreover, because this "yes" or "no" to sovereignty" debate has been going on for 20 years, the Quebec media have helped to create a generation of political illiterates. This may explain the poor quality of discussions that have taken place in the regional commissions on the future of Quebec.

If there is any "special" role for the media, it should be one of enlightening the debate about the future of Quebec. But journalists are no experts themselves. And the ones that could help the media to play such a positive role—academics and bureaucrats—have no interest in participating in this educational process. It is unfortunate that too often journalists are approached by groups of academics or bureaucrats—not to say a word of politicians—to "communicate" something, not to help journalists inform their public.

"RESPONSIBLY," YOU ASKED?

I am afraid there is no such thing as "responsible" media in this modern age of the multi-channel television. Indeed, television networks set the tone and agenda of political debates, including:

Continued, see "The Media's Special Role and Responsibility" on page 94.

"The Media's Special Role and Responsibility,"

continued from page 95.

- A very *superficial* way of informing people where images and symbols are more important than concepts and ideas. We are reaching the point where a political option may succeed, or fail, because of the skills of the political leader who personifies such an option.
- A very *simplistic*, almost cartoonish, way of debating issues. And referenda being the most elementary form of any political debate—it takes one word, "yes" or "no," to settle it—television is *the* medium par excellence. If there is any referendum this year, it will be interesting to see how both camps adjust. For example, it was one thing in 1980 for Marc Lalonde or Monique Bégin to whisper to a group of seniors that, with a separate Quebec, they may lose their pension. If today's Paul Martin or Lloyd Axworthy were to make that argument in front of a camera, their message would be amplified to the point perhaps of killing their case.
- An *antagonistic* medium. It is impossible to go from Somalia to

Yugoslavia to the crash site of an airplane and then to a civilized debate about the Triple E Senate. We have blood on the set, people shooting and crying; and the more they look outraged, the better show it is. Television works counter to consensus building in any national debate. One might say that in a referendum debate, it is all the better since it is sort of a showdown. It may be. But I suggest that the scars of modern political debates, because of their dramatization by television coverage, will run deeper, much deeper. And it is an issue worth considering when one asks the other question: "Can both Canada and Quebec win in this game?"

There is a last issue about the "role of the media" in this age of telepolitics. It is the "CNN phenomenon"—that is, the creation of the CBC's *Newsworld* and of the French Radio Canada's *RDI*. They can bring—live—any event of interest for political scientists, bureaucrats, and influencers. Just think of the magic of this medium where a press conference in Ottawa provokes immediate reactions in Victoria and St. John's—and all of this is accessible

from living rooms in Montréal and Toronto!

This form of television has become such a point of reference that journalists and politicians keep tuned to those channels. Indeed, because they are news by themselves, political debates can easily spin out of control. Given the very sophisticated nature of modern media—with computers, cellular telephones, and satellite links—people are immediately, and in very great detail, informed on what the governments are doing on their behalf. Just compare the modern debates about the future of Canada and the extreme secrecy that covered the 1864 Charlottetown conference. It may be that referendums are a mere byproduct of modern communications. Put another way, the media may not only have a "special role to play," they may be the ultimate *raison d'être* for those referenda.

Michel Vastel is national columnist for Le Soleil (Quebec), Le Droit (Ottawa), Le Quotidien (Chicoutimi), and a feature writer for the magazine L'Actualité.

GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY AND THE RULE OF LAW

by Jean-Gabriel Castel

BOARDED AT GUNPOINT

On March 9, 1995, in an area of the high seas adjacent to the Canadian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, a Canadian government vessel, after firing several rounds of ammunition across the bow of the Spanish vessel the *Estai*, forced her to heave to. She was boarded at gunpoint for the purpose of inspection

and search. Upon allegedly finding numerous violations of the *Coastal Fisheries Protection Act* ("the Act"), the *Estai* and her master were arrested and escorted to St. John's, Newfoundland.

Upon posting a bond, both were released pending court proceedings. This action was taken pursuant to the Act as amended in May 1994, which prohibits classes of foreign

fishing vessels from fishing for straddling stocks in the regulatory area of the high seas beyond the EEZ, an area covered by the 1978 Convention on Future Multilateral Cooperation in the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (NAFO), in contravention of certain conservation and management measures.

The Act allows the use of force to disable a foreign fishing vessel if the Canadian protection officer is proceeding lawfully to arrest her master and believes, on reasonable grounds, that such force is necessary. In this case, the master of the *Estai* refused to heave to and have