
Politics as Communications: Interview with Hon. Garth Turner MP



Most legislators have a web site but few use them to the same extent as Garth Turner. Mr. Turner was MP for Halton Peel from 1988-1993. After thirteen years in the private sector he returned to the House of Commons in January 2006. In this interview he discusses his political career and why he thinks technology is the key to reinvigorating parliamentary institutions and improving relations between elected MPs and the electors. The interview was conducted by Gary Levy in June 2006.

It has been thirteen years since you were last a Member of the House of Commons. What has changed?

Some things have changed dramatically. Other things are exactly the same. In terms of technology there was no internet, no web casting, no blackberries when I was here last. The fundamental machinery of government and the fundamental machinery of the House has not changed. What I do perceive after thirteen years in the private sector is more cynicism and more misunderstanding of Parliament. I sense that the place is in ill repute. Perhaps it is because of the scandals or perhaps there are other reasons. This led me to reflect on how I might play a small part in changing that. So one of my goals in politics is to give people the opportunity to know more about Parliament and their elected members by means of the internet.

Did your experience in the private sector lead you to this realization?

Not really. I am basically a journalist and an entrepreneur. In 1993 I joined CTV and became a business Editor for them. I authored seven best-selling books on business and finance, hosted the country's most watched business television show. I spent eight years on the speaking circuit, going coast to coast giving seminars on personal finances. Six years ago I founded Toronto-based Millennium Media Television an independent producer of network television programming. The company has produced series for CTV, Global, YTV (Youth TV), TVO (TV Ontario) and other Canadian and international broadcasters.

My wife Dorothy and I founded the Credit River Company. Our mission statement was "heritage, landmarks and environment" and we brought back as viable businesses many heritage buildings. I

have always felt our Canadian built heritage has been overlooked.

Like many Canadians in and outside of Parliament I was aware of the general disillusionment with politics. This was reflected in low voter turnout and various other ways.

Was it a difficult decision to go back into politics?

No but like most people I expected the government to be defeated in the Spring of 2004. Shortly after winning a hotly contested nomination for the Conservative Party in May 2004 I realized it was going to be months before the election was called. For eight months I campaigned every day. It was a fantastic opportunity to take the pulse of the riding. I knocked on over 25,000 doors in my riding of Halton. Immediately after being nominated I started a daily diary or Blog on my web site and I have been very care-

ful to keep it updated. It has proven to be quite popular and within three months I was getting more than a million hits per month.

How would you describe your web site?

Like all sites it is a work in progress. However it is important to have an underlying philosophy and from the beginning I wanted my web site to be primarily an interactive political portal and not a photo album, a vanity site or a forum for partisan advocacy.

The site has three main elements. It is a bona fide daily news service from which viewers can receive national, international and local news. I want this to be hard news and not necessarily political spin. The second element is my Blog which I try to write every day. It is my personal reflections on politics and public life and it tends to provoke reactions of both praise and damnation.

The latest element of the site is streaming web video which I call MPTV. While still in the early stages, I am convinced this is the way of the future and there has been tremendous response since I started broadcasting MPTV in June 2006.

The site also contains other content including links to a number of newspaper articles that I wrote in the past and a number of audio podcasts that I did during my first few weeks in Ottawa after the election. Audio is probably the least effective medium for the internet and while I may do a few more I think we will focus on more video than audio in the future.

What type of things do you cover on MPTV?

I did a number of interviews with some high profile individuals and with some others who are probably less well-known outside of Ottawa.

For example, I turned the tables on several journalists by interviewing Mike Duffy of CTV, Bill Rodgers of the *Sun*, and Hannah Boudreau of Global TV. I also interviewed the Speaker of the House of Commons, Peter Milliken, several cabinet Ministers including the President of the Treasury Board, John Baird and Health Minister Tony Clement, and one party Leader, Jack Layton. But the majority of interviews have been with ordinary members of Parliament, from all parties. The mainstream media tends to ignore anyone who is not a Cabinet Minister or party leader and I think a number of private members have interesting stories to tell and deserve to be better known.

I do not try to replay Question Period or score political points. My goal is to give viewers a look at the human side of politics by talking about daily life on the Hill with all its joys and frustrations. In this way I hope the average citizen will be able to identify with the men and women who serve them in Ottawa and perhaps end up with a slightly better opinion of us as a group. We also have to get along in Parliament and these sessions can contribute to better relations between individuals from different parties. Among the MPs I interviewed during the first month of MPTV were Garry Breitkreuz, Myron Thompson, Lee Richardson, Gord Brown, Helena Guergis, Ron Cannan, Senator Marjory LeBreton, John McCallum and Peter Stoffer. I also gave viewers a tour of the newly renovated Library of Parliament and in the future I will take them to other parts of the Parliamentary Precincts rarely seen by most Canadians.

These interviews were broadcast live at 7:00 pm on Thursdays in June and they are archived and available for later viewing on my site. In the

fall I hope to expand MPTV to do daily broadcasts.

Aside from interviewing fellow parliamentarians can you give some other examples of how you use or plan to use the web site?

The possibilities are endless. The only limit is our imagination. In a minority Parliament members cannot travel home as often as they would like since there may be votes going on in Ottawa. If I am stuck in Ottawa I can walk into my studio, flick on four switches and be on the internet. I can have a video conference with someone in my constituency office or in his or her home or office. If that person has a computer and a web cam we can meet in real time and I can try to help them with their issues. If a constituent is celebrating a 90th birthday or a 60th wedding anniversary I can arrange to send them video greetings or even make an appearance, in real time, on their computer at the time of the celebration. If there is an event in my constituency stick a monitor on a desk and I can be there even though I am really some 400 kilometers away in Ottawa. We are just scratching the surface of what we can do. Eventually I may have online office hours when my constituents can interact with me as easily as if I was in my constituency.

There does not seem to be an obvious Conservative connection on your website

That is deliberate and I have taken heat for not having a Conservative logo on my website. But there is a reason. I am the Member of Parliament for all the people of Halton. I represent all my electors whether they voted for me or for the Liberals, the NDP or even if they did not vote at all. The last thing I want to do is to push a party logo in the face of some constituent who is asking me to help

with some particular issue. I think many members of Parliament are losing a great opportunity to connect with their constituents when they turn the content of their web sites over to party headquarters.

I should add that I am willing to make my studio and facilities available to other Members of Parliament regardless of party if they find themselves stuck in Ottawa for a vote when they have an important meeting in their constituency.

Your website must consume enormous resources both in terms of time and money? Do you have extra staff to manage your web site?

Not at all. The site is completely controlled by me and my two office staff in Ottawa. We select the items that appear in our news service. We do the filming, editing, graphics, postings and virtually all other ongoing work in connection with the site. I did pay, out of my own pocket, about \$20,000 for the necessary cameras and related paraphernalia. The bandwidth for MPTV is provided by the House of Commons since it has excess and unused capacity in the evening hours. Any other expenses come out of a regular office budget that is available to all MPs.

I did have some assistance in designing the site from William Stratas of Planetcast. He created a page that is hand-coded to the highest technical standards, as specified by the World Wide Web Consor-

tium, the authoritative global technical governance body. The page can be viewed in French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. I won't go into any of the technical gobbledygook but the web site conforms to the highest accessibility compliance requirements for users with physical handicaps. I know of no other web site for federal elected representatives or government departments that offers such a high level of accessibility for disabled Canadians.

How much of your own time is devoted to this project?

The major task for me is writing the Blog. It is about 700 words every day. I tend to do this at around 11:00 pm each night and it takes an hour or so. I also spend some time responding to comments from my BlackBerry but this can be done while I am in the Chamber or in committee or at the airport. I enjoy writing and I can do it fairly quickly so this is not too onerous a task. The MPTV interviews take about 2 hours of my time per week. I would estimate that my staff spend about 20 hours a week on web-related activities.

What has been the reaction of your colleagues to this project?

Well some look at me a bit sideways but after only three weeks MPTV is fully booked for the foreseeable future. As far as I am aware no other

MPs are broadcasting or creating content for the internet the way I am. As time goes by more and more of them will come to the conclusion that this is the way to go. It is not really that complicated. Young people coming out of university today have all the skills needed to run this technology. The hardware and software are affordable and easy to learn.

What impact is this going to have on politics and on the media?

I think there are significant consequences for MPs. In an earlier era the railways were a revolutionary technology. They not only tied the country together but were the means by which MPs came to Ottawa. Today the Internet is the technology that brings the country together and takes MPs to their constituents.

There will also be a significant impact on the media. Many foresee a decline in the printed newspaper as a source of information and an increase in the use of online news services. There will also be a change in the relationship between journalists and politicians. Members will come to realize that they do not have to go trolling for microphones after question period. They can, if they want, get their message complete and unedited out on the internet and directed to precisely the people they want to reach. This has huge implications for the mainstream press gallery as we know it.