
Ontario Throne Speeches Through the Lens of Mass Media

by James Cairns

This paper presents highlights from a larger study that examines shifts in twentieth century coverage of the ceremonial Opening of the Ontario Legislature. The first section summarizes limitations of traditional approaches to parliamentary openings. The second section identifies changes to ways in which newspapers have approached and described the legislative opening over the past century. The concluding section makes generalizations about parliamentary institutions and political culture.

Communication scholars in Canada have long observed that “the media form our psychic environment, especially with respect to matters beyond our direct personal experience, a realm into which most aspects of politics fall.”¹ British sociologist John B. Thompson uses the term “mediated publicness” in drawing attention to ways in which communication technologies such as newspapers, television, and the internet foster a sense of communal experience among distant and diverse political observers.² Clearly mass media are key to how people conceive of themselves as parts of larger political communities. But as Thompson’s term implies, it is important to bear in mind the fact that media not only transmit political information, but also help to frame the very ways in which political reality is understood. The idea is crucial to parliamentary studies because it suggests that the reality-making functions of mass media both depend upon and reveal shared understandings of the meaning of political institutions.

Standard Approaches to Parliamentary Openings

Political science interpretations of the legislative opening in Canada are conceptually restricted by a prevailing disposition to view the event as an exclusively parliamentary affair. In what little writing has been done on the topic, the opening tends to be described as part of: the administration of parliament, the ceremonial functions of the Crown, or the government’s (explicit or hidden) agenda. Political science textbooks take the same tack: they interpret the opening as the commencement of a new legislative session; or as a commemoration of Canada’s British heritage; or as a list of government policy proposals.

It should come as no surprise that parliamentary issues are well represented in scholarly texts. The opening is a parliamentary affair; but is it exclusively thus? Bearing in mind the three perspectives from which political scientists typically view the civic ritual, it becomes apparent that what has been consistently excluded from debate is the People. The event is *the promise* of parliamentary politics, in both literal and figurative senses of the term. But how is this affair brought to life outside the walls of parliament? The question is never asked. Although the citizenry is not the only audience for which the opening is performed, it does constitute a significant audience, perhaps not by rule, but certainly by convention. Where are citizens located in relation to the legislative opening?

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Opening the Legislature Through the Lens of Mass Media

“For the majority of citizens in mass societies such as Canada, the principal continuing connection to leaders and institutions is provided by the words, sounds, and images circulating in the mass media.”³ Therefore, in practice, to think about the meaning for citizens of the legislative opening is to think about news coverage of the legislative opening. How was the meaning of the Opening of the Legislature in Ontario represented in mainstream newspapers between 1900 and 2007?⁴

In the first four decades of the twentieth century, newspapers represented the ceremony itself – the scene and setting at Queen’s Park—as the most salient feature of the Opening of the Legislature.

In addition to fulfilling constitutional obligations, the opening was understood to be “a social function. Mere statesmen were backed into the obscurity of the back seats... while society had its fling. And what a day society made of it!”⁵ The crush of the crowd, the dazzling attire of guests, and the stateliness of the royal procession were held up as examples of Ontario’s wealth and prosperity. In 1905, for example, the Toronto *Star* interpreted the “scene inside the chamber” not simply as confirmation of the social elite’s ability to throw a good party, but as “in-disputable proof... that Ontario is a prosperous and progressive Province.”⁶

News stories tended to be organized in chronological order. They began with the arrival of spectators on the legislative grounds (many of whom took up positions in the public galleries between three and five hours in advance of the Throne Speech), and proceeded through the spectacle of the official procession, through administrative procedures and the Speech from the Throne, and concluded at the post-Speech tea-party typically held in the lieutenant governor’s suite. The ceremony was described as being especially important to women, for prior to 1944 it constituted the lone legitimate opportunity for women to sit on the floor of Ontario’s Legislative Assembly. Even after the extension of the franchise in 1917, women’s place on the floor at the opening was newsworthy: in 1925, for example, “a view from the gallery showed a feminist millennium, a parliament of man become a parliament of women.”⁷ Newspaper pages for women listed names of hundreds of guests and described, in detail, the gowns of “Ontario’s feminine officialdom.”⁸

Coverage of the Throne Speech tended to consist of one or two large stories dealing with the legislative agenda as a whole. Newspaper analysis did not parse the contents of the Speech, assess their potential impact on different

social groups, or include reaction from government supporters and opponents. For example, after one full column describing the scene and setting at Queen’s Park, a *Star* story from 1915 reads, “The Speech from the Throne points out that there is a marked deficit to be met by the Province, and predicts special taxation to meet the situation. Other measures predicted are the *Moratorium Act*, changes in the *Workmen’s Compensation Act*, amendments to the *Liquor License Act*, improved boiler inspection, and good roads legislation.”⁹ It is almost impossible to imagine a time when talk of provincial deficits and taxes came *after* details about the “full State ceremonial” and the “gubernatorial procession”, not to mention a time when the ritual’s policy features were unaccompanied by reaction from politicians and extra-parliamentary associations. Yet, as a rule, critical policy analysis was suspended for the day.

Drawing on the language of vaudevillian show-business to explain the meaning and popularity of the event at Queen’s Park, in 1905 the *Telegram* opined that “The opening of a Legislature is a combination of a society parade, a military pageant and a political demonstration. A promoter who could enroll all these interests on behalf of his scheme would not need to write home for money.”¹⁰ Although made partly in jest, the observation neatly summarizes the way in which newspapers in the first half of the twentieth century framed the legislative opening. Certainly policy promises and political parties were understood to be central parts of the affair; but in general, newspapers portrayed the ritual’s multiple, at times contradictory, and far from exclusively legislative meanings to be its defining quality.

The pivotal trend in postwar coverage of the legislative opening has been the rise to dominance of the Speech from the Throne. In today’s store of assumed journalistic knowledge, the significance of the proposed legislative agenda has become such that even reporters in the Queen’s Park press gallery are unlikely to refer to the opening as anything other than “Throne Speech day.”¹¹ Taken as evidence of conceptual shifts transpiring over the course of the twentieth century, this lexical revision suggests that the meaning of the event has changed not in degree but in kind. The Table shows that the dominant journalistic storyline of earlier times was turned on its head in the postwar era.

Contemporary interpretations of the legislative opening’s significance are exemplified by newspaper pages dedicated exclusively to the Speech from the Throne. These “Throne Speech pages” (or page) reside somewhere within a newspaper’s first section. Though known to carry more than a dozen news items on different policy proposals, this new form of news is distinguished by

Comparing Themes of Newspaper Coverage of the Legislative Opening

	Total number of items		Primary theme is scene and setting		Primary theme is Throne Speech/partisan politics	
	1900-1945	1950-2007	1900-1945	1950-2007	1900-1945	1950-2007
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	83	119	58 (70%)	40 (34%)	25 (30%)	79 (66%)
<i>Toronto Daily Star</i>	76	163	45 (59%)	45 (28%)	31 (41%)	118 (72%)
<i>Toronto Evening Telegram / Sun</i>	76	143	63 (83%)	55 (38%)	13 (17%)	88 (62%)
Total	235	425	166 (71%)	140 (33%)	69 (29%)	285 (67%)

a banner running across the top of the page that unifies disparate stories and images under a central theme of, for example, “Bill’s boring blueprint;”¹² “The Tory Speech from the Throne;”¹³ “Ontario Throne Speech,”¹⁴ or simply “Throne Speech.”¹⁵

The proliferation and professionalization of Throne Speech analysis brings with it an unexpected consequence: namely, greater interest in items absent from the Speech. The legislative opening news conference, a development of the television era, is the typical place where such absences are noted. The news conference is significant for two reasons. First, increasingly aggressive news conference questions force the government to account for its Throne Speech in ways not demanded by parliamentary procedure. It should be mentioned, however, that news conferences also furnish the government with an unprecedented public forum in which to promote legislative plans. Second, from the perspective of partisan politics, the news conference establishes what the House itself does not—namely, an opening-day platform for criticism from members of the parliamentary opposition.

Neither 1950 nor 1955 coverage included opposition quotations; yet in each case sampled after 1960, all newspapers included at least one opposition voice reacting to the Speech from the Throne. On four different occasions in the postwar sample, opposition quotations appeared in six stories in a single year. In contrast to early twentieth century coverage, when the opening was understood to be a break from traditional partisan scripts, the event has been incorporated into the partisan battle that ravages Ontario politics every day. This trend is bolstered by the postwar emergence of provocative opinion columnists who emphasize and assess opening-day partisan strategy.

Finally, since the 1970s, coverage of the Opening of the Legislature has included new types of engagement from extra-parliamentary individuals and groups. For exam-

ple, a 1990 front-page story in the *Globe and Mail* begins: “If Vyrn Peterson has his way, Ontario’s newest nuclear power plant will be built just down the road from this cluttered welding shop and home on the Trans-Canada Highway in Blind River.”¹⁶ The story is written in anticipation of that day’s Speech from the Throne and the government’s impending decision on whether to expand nuclear power generation. But who is Vyrn Peterson? He is not a politician; he is a concerned citizen. Newsreaders also hear from Ed Burt, “a beef and pig farmer”, who argues that the idea of nuclear power in Blind River is “just plain stupid”. Later in the story the vice-president of the Canadian Nuclear Association adds an industry perspective to discussion. In sum, hours before the Throne Speech was delivered in the Chamber, news coverage revealed extra-parliamentary stakeholders debating the province’s legislative agenda.

If the legislative opening was once a representation of a whole hierarchical social order centred around High Society, it is now symbolic of the marketplace of competing ideas in an ideal liberal-pluralist society. This and other preceding observations call out for further explanation. But the purpose of the foregoing discussion has not been to explain but to point out previously overlooked trends.

Implications for Parliamentary Studies

The case study supports the claim that newspaper coverage reveals a shift in social knowledge about the centrepiece of the parliamentary calendar. In light of lessons learned from Ontario’s legislative opening, what generalizations can be made about the benefits of studying parliament through the lens of mass media? First, a mediated approach to legislatures offers insight into the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of Canada’s central political institutions. In contrast to the predictable results of trying to pin down exactly what the legislative open-

ing is, a project that works to demonstrate ways in which the ritual has been variously depicted in news coverage allows the opening to be viewed as both practical *and* ceremonial, anachronistic *and* relevant, capable of producing both arousal *and* quiescence. This perspective sees policy *and* posturing, plans *and* uncertainties, fears *and* assurances. It notes promises *and* failures, power *and* fragility, past *and* future. Research on legislatures in Canada “has never been highly theoretical.”¹⁷ The trend is borne out by Malloy’s recent call for a new generation of legislative studies that moves beyond traditional conceptions of responsible government and “toward greater engagement with alternative conceptions of representation and democratic accountability.”¹⁸ A mediated approach to parliament provides the theoretical flexibility required to explore the fact that parliament is constantly performing multiple roles and exercising multiple forms of authority.

Second, the case study suggests that a mediated approach can be used to shed light upon the historical development of parliament. To be sure, not all coverage from earlier times is as rich as the Toronto *Globe* story of 1930, in which that year’s legislative opening is described through the eyes of the ghost of the late British parliamentarian and diarist, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703). However, the Pepys piece is a uniquely puzzling example through which a more general point can be made: namely, that popular conceptions of parliament are not fixed forever and always. On the contrary, they are historically-situated and can change over time. Through modern eyes historical coverage can seem odd; but recall the words of the great cultural historian Robert Darnton: “When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning.”¹⁹

The story told by Pepys’ ghost begins to make more sense after being viewed in light of the fact that “until at least World War II the worship of the monarchy and the British Empire enjoyed almost cult status in Canadian society.”²⁰ The witness to numerous state openings at the mother of Parliament, Pepys was an ideal judge of imperial pomp and circumstance in the Dominion. (His verdict? High praise all around.) It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the connections between the legislative opening and British culture in Ontario. But it is worth pointing out that the connection was made clearer after reading the Pepys story with the following questions in mind: Who produced this story, for whom was it written, and why? What does the story reveal about the authority of the producer? What does it suggest about the expectations of the reader? And most im-

portant, what are the implied messages of the story—the things that are not stated explicitly but have to be assumed if the story is to make sense?

A list of questions is a fitting way to introduce this paper’s final point, for the peculiarities and shifts observed in coverage of the legislative opening demonstrate that a mediated approach generates new questions about how parliamentary authority operates at the level of culture. At the risk of obscuring the practical value of this idea under a layer of theoretical jargon, some clarification is necessary because culture is such a highly contested term. For the purposes of this argument, culture can be defined as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”²¹

There is no need to characterize citizens as witless dupes who will believe anything they see on television in order to appreciate the fact that a mediated approach to parliament brings citizens a step into the frame of analysis. Asking questions about media coverage is an essential part of identifying shared but unstated assumptions about what political institutions and actors mean to the people that they represent. Such questions offer rich opportunities for thinking about parliament through the eyes of the person (with the paper)-on-the-street. This is not to say that a creative thought experiment is a substitute for political efficacy. But if research on legislatures is to remain relevant during an era in which communication technologies are rapidly becoming both more sophisticated and more widely used, it must develop new ways of engaging legislative politics in mass mediated forms. To those who say that culture is the responsibility of some other analytical jurisdiction, this paper responds that media coverage is no less part of what constitutes parliament than budget day and division bells. Experts on parliament are uniquely positioned to blaze new paths in the field; they are, after all, experts on parliament.

What parts of parliament are covered closely, and what kind of information about their form and function is explicit and implicit in news coverage? What features of parliament go unreported that ought to attract greater media attention; and do different jurisdictions offer ideas about how to improve the situation in Canada? Is it possible to identify recurring errors in mass mediated descriptions of parliament, and what impact does this have on Canadian democracy? What about the Canadian Senate—how are its forms and functions framed by mass media? What similarities and differences can be identified among news coverage of different provincial legislatures? How do extra-parliamentary groups such as

women, immigrants, chambers of commerce, children, labour unions, First Nations, or city councils figure into news coverage of parliament – and has coverage changed over time?

David E. Smith's Donner prize-winning book on the House of Commons offers an encouraging sign that these sorts of questions are indeed becoming more central to parliamentary studies in Canada. In the penultimate chapter, Smith asks: "Do the media privilege one democratic model or rhetoric over another, that is, parliamentary, or constitutional, or electoral?"²² A recent trend in newspaper coverage of the Opening of the Legislature offers one example of the press functioning in ways that promote a model of Smith's "electoral democracy." Recall that since the Second World War opening-day coverage has become increasingly focused on debate among parliamentarians, extra-parliamentary groups, and journalists, in what might be called an expanded sphere of legislative politics. As the role of media in facilitating political debate is cemented, the Assembly as a place has lost some of its centrality and authority. Acknowledging the limitations of a single case study, however, this paper is content to conclude with Smith: these questions require more research.

Depending on what topics and scales of analysis are taken up by future researchers, different mediated approaches to parliament will require different types of engagement with scholarship on mass media and society. Some students of parliament may want to read widely in literature on communication and culture before formulating new research questions. Recent work examining media coverage of elections, political advertising, and issues of race and gender demonstrates that many political scientists already have.²³ Others may choose to examine media texts more informally, surveying news coverage not as a method meant to produce conclusions, but as a way of inspiring initial questions. Regardless of the specific theoretical and methodological traditions that inform new mediated approaches, the study of parliament will be strengthened as more parliamentary observers reflect upon the ways in which their objects of study appear through the lens of mass media.

Notes

1. Frederick J. Fletcher and Daphne Gottlieb Taras, "Images and issues: The mass media and politics in Canada," in *Canadian politics in the 1990s*, 3rd ed. Ed. M.S. Whittington and G. Williams, Nelson, Scarborough, 1990, p. 221.
2. John B. Thompson, *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media* Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 126.
3. Robert Everett and Frederick J. Fletcher, "The mass media and political communication in Canada," in *Communications in Canadian society*, 5th ed. Ed. C. McKie and B.D. Singer, Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto, p. 167.
4. The body of texts examined in the larger study consists of 660 newspaper items drawn from 4 Ontario dailies: the *Toronto Evening Telegram* (*Telegram* from 1949 to 1971), *Toronto Globe* (*Globe and Mail* since 1936), *Toronto Daily Star* (*Star* since 1971), and *Toronto Sun*. The reason for examining these particular publications is the combination of their ongoing focus on Ontario politics and their high rates of circulation. Using a method of maximum variation sampling, the principles guiding text-selection were as follows: *beginning in 1900 and proceeding in five-year increments, the textual sample consists of all news items relating to the first legislative opening in a given year, appearing in any part of the Globe, Star, Telegram, and Sun, published on the day of the Throne Speech, as well as the day following the opening ceremonies.* The reason that the sample ends in a year without a "0" or "5" at the end is because there was no legislative opening in 2000, which meant that the first opening of 2001 was analyzed instead. Five years after that there was no legislative opening in 2006, meaning that the corpus concludes with coverage from 2007. Methodological literature on news narrative and news framing informed the preparation of a coding schedule that includes both qualitative and quantitative categories. After two rounds of experimental coding with the purpose of developing a systematic approach, a single coding sheet was used to analyze all 660 items in the corpus. Five interviews with journalists and other people working at Queen's Park supplement textual research. For a copy of the final coding schedule, please contact the author: j3cairns@ryerson.ca.
5. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, February 16, 1915, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, March 23, 1905, p. 7.
7. *Toronto Daily Star*, February 11, 1925, p. 7.
8. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, February 11, 1925, p. 9.
9. *Toronto Daily Star*, February 16, 1915, p. 2.
10. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, March 23, 1905, p. 9.
11. Thomas Walkom, interview by the author, 23 April 2007.
12. *Toronto Sun*, March 12, 1980, pp 3, 62-63.
13. *Toronto Star*, June 5, 1985, pp. A16, A17.
14. *Globe and Mail*, November 21, 1990, p. A8.
15. *Toronto Star*, November 30, 2007, p. A19.
16. *Globe and Mail*, November 20, 1990.
17. Michael M. Atkinson and Paul G. Thomas, "Studying the Canadian Parliament," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 18, no. 3, 1993, p.424; see also Mark Sproule-Jones, "The enduring colony? Political institutions and political science in Canada," *Publius*, Vol. 14, no. 1, 1984, pp. 93-108.
18. Jonathan Malloy, "The 'responsible government approach' and its effect on Canadian legislative studies," *Canadian Study of Parliament Group, Parliamentary Perspectives*, Vol. 5 2002, p. 13.
19. Robert Darnton, *The great cat massacre... and other episodes in French cultural history*, Vintage Books, New York, 1985, p. 5.

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20. Daniel Francis, *National dreams: Myth, memory, and Canadian history*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 1997, p. 53.
 21. Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays by Clifford Geertz*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, p. 89.
 22. David E. Smith, *The people's House of Commons: Theories of democracy in contention*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007, p. 133.
 23. See for example: Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt, "Filtering the female: Television news coverage of the 1993 Canadian leaders' debates," *Women & Politics*, Vol. 21, no. 4 2000, pp. 105-31; Frederick J. Fletcher, ed., *Reporting the*

campaign: Election coverage in Canada. Vol. 22 of the research studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Dundurn Press, Toronto, 1991; Jonathan W. Rose, *Making 'pictures in our heads': Government advertising in Canada*, Praeger, Westport, 2000; Linda Trimble, "Gender, political leadership and media visibility: *Globe and Mail* coverage of Conservative Party of Canada leadership contests," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 40, no. 4, 2007, pp. 969-93; Yasmin Jiwani, *Discourses of denial: Mediations of race, gender, and violence*, UBC Press, Vancouver.