Elly Alboim
Former Senior Advisor to Paul Martin

Elly Alboim is currently a Principal at the Earnscliffe Strategy Group, one of Canada’s oldest independent government relations firms, where he leads their strategic communications practice. He also spent 10 years as a senior advisor to the Right Honourable Paul Martin during his tenure as Minister of Finance and Prime Minister. Prior to these endeavours, Mr. Alboim was the Parliamentary Bureau Chief and National Political Editor for CBC Television News, during which time he won a Gemini award for his coverage of the Meech Lake Accord. Mr. Alboim is also a Professor of Journalism at Carleton University.

Public Policy and the Media: How does media shape or frame our dialogue of important policy? When is it good for policy and bad for policy?

Well it’s generally not good for policy. I think media is largely impatient with public policy, unless it generates news within its definition, and news usually means that there’s got to be some consumer implication. There’s got to be some conflict, some division of opinion, there has got to be political consequence. It’s detached from the intrinsic importance of a public policy, there are lots of public policies that are very important media has got very little interest in. Then there’s lots of public policy that are marginal, and they become the focus of the news. Media has no patience with incrementalism; it really likes to cover things at the beginning and the end, not in the middle. And public policy by definition is developed slowly, is usually incremental in steps and hardly ever is dramatic. That does not generally fit with media models, and then, the implication of that is that media ends up often distorting public policy in terms of its importance, its relevance, its place in the hierarchy.

[Media] ends up often exaggerating the conflict or the narrative or the divisions of opinion, or sometimes, tremendously overemphasizing the potential implications or consequence in order to make it newsworthy. In that kind of environment, policy makers tend to really
worry about media impact on what they do and how media distributes information about public policy. It’s a real conundrum because you can put all the material you want on websites, and generally people still get their information pushed at them by media, as opposed to pulling it down from websites. So the best way to get information out still, is through media, but media has got very little intrinsic interest in what government is saying or doing. It’s a very, very difficult problem. And often, public policy is shaped with an eye on media and an eye on what the final framing will be. Sometimes that [shaping] ends up distorting what should be the policy content into something else because the view is after media is done with it, there’s going to be significant damage, and it may not be able to communicate it in this particular political context.

**Do you think that decreasing access to information or by having the media “off policy makers backs” they could develop policy more easily and with less scrutiny?**

Well that’s clearly what this government believes. Let me put it this way, this government I think believes the less media scrutiny and the less information, the better off it’s going to be. Because I think its starts from a point of departure that “media isn’t going to do us any favours.” But you know, there are democratic reasons for the public to know about policy development and content, and there’s a responsibility in my view for media to treat it dispassionately. Media tends not to do that; at least most media tends not to do that. Would we be better off without that kind of transparency? The ultimate answer is no, with a caveat, that in some cases the answer is yes. Because, complex policy that is important but may be unpopular has an awful time surviving in the current context. Absent the media coverage and scrutiny, it may get into place more easily. The problem with that of course is that it places a tremendous amount of faith in the government to act appropriately and govern appropriately. I think the evidence we have is that government will take advantage of those circumstances and not often do what’s right but do what it wants to politically.

**Could there be a shift in media coverage perhaps?**

That’s likely impossible, since they’re independent and they operate according to a set of business principles and professional principles that we can’t control. We have an endless conundrum. In my world, media would change its practices and its coverage patterns, but
I just don’t see it happening.

You know, the more expert the media, and the more independent the medium, the more dispassionate treatment you tend to get. But that’s not true of the mass media vehicles. That’s true of newsletters, the specialized media and the truly expert. The media that exists in the marketplace, that’s in competition with its competitors, it’s a very tough world out there these days for them as you know. There’s tremendous competition among these organizations and between mediums, least of which is the digital world. They’re all living in a jungle of survival and they do what they need to do to attract attention to themselves. Often that doesn’t help dispassionate coverage of things that don’t seem to be terribly interesting or sexy or attractive.

**With your experience from working on the “other side,” how do you go about packaging policy for public consumption?**

Well it depends how you are. I don’t know how to answer that because I’ve never worked for people like this government. Its answers would be different than my answers. It depends on your objectives I guess.

**Okay. So before we were talking about dealing with unpopular policy, even divisive policy, how do you deal with that?**

In general terms, the more technical, the more complex, the more you can get control of the narrative to make it seem complex and technical, the less interested media will be. And the more chance you have at getting it done. If you’re packing it and it’s inevitable that its going to be fought out in the mass media pit, it just then becomes the battle of the storylines. Often you’ve got to simplify and distort the emphasis to emphasize the positive outcomes, and dismiss or belittle the negative consequences. Yet, it’s very hard to put out dispassionate analysis and presentations of divisive policies and expect them to move forward easily because the opposition has entrenched tendency to trash it. Media tends to see itself in an adversarial relationship to government and often a critical one. So it tends to act as an addition opposition. Its very hard to get a fair shake or treatment unless you line up your own third party supporters and get them in the battle, and you treat every policy issue as a campaign or war.
Does the public ever surprise government in how they react to policy?

Oh of course. All the time.

I think a recent example is the B.C. government was surprised by the reaction to the HST. It never would have proceeded had it understood that it would drive their premier’s popularity rating down to 8 per cent. But sure, there are all sorts of instances. I think the public’s proroguing response (2010 prorogation) stunned the government. There are dozens of examples.

Moving into questions on the role of an advisor, here in public policy school we learn about speaking truth to power. I'm wondering what your understanding of that phrase is?

That it’s an aphorism that makes people feel better. It’s honoured more in the breach than in the execution. I think there’s noble intent and clearly without hardheaded, clear-eyed analysis, you can make mistakes. The civil service is there to provide that sort of analysis. In my experience, the civil service is also there to get the government’s program implemented. And that can be a conflict, particularly if it disagrees with the substance of the program. So you run into an interesting circumstance where you have to speak truth to power, but once power rules and makes its decision, you have a responsibility to implement. It’s a weird kind of power, where it says “speak the truth” but maybe implementing something else. There’s some truth in it and there’s some hyperbole, and that is an unfortunate reality, at least from my experience. Civil servants in some departments feel that they are really the experts and the keepers of the faith, and the politicians come and go. And, they have their own agendas based on their own policy analysis. You get into circumstances of manipulation, of “Yes Minister” kind of circumstance. It’s very dynamic, and sometimes, you see politicians trying to speak truth to the bureaucrats as well. It really depends on the personalities, the ministry, and the policy that’s on the table. Sometimes a better phrase is “Do no harm” instead of “Speak truth to power.”

What do you mean that, “Do no harm?”

Because you can’t always get your way, you can’t always get governments to do what you think is right if you’re a civil servant. At least you can stop them from doing significant harm. Often the bureaucrat’s job is to smooth out the really rough edges and the things
that have significant implications for causing damage, but allow the government to proceed with the way it wants to proceed.

**How do different governments use the public service? How do they differ in how they rely on them?**

That certainly changes. This current government does not particularly rely on the public service and can be very suspicious of the public service. There are some departments of government where department offices and ministers offices barely speak. There are other offices where the relationship is better. As the years go on, the hostility weakens in most places and gets more cooperative. Then there are governments wholly dependent on the public service and believes our public service should move policy forward for options. In some ways it’s perfectly natural [for the current government’s stance]. This government came in after 11 years of Liberal rule. The Liberals appointed every senior servant. Brian Mulroney was confronted with the same thing in ’84. There is a presumption sometimes that the bureaucracy, who have largely been appointed by a previous government, represent that government’s views. And, there’s some truth to that. I mean why would a government appoint senior bureaucrats it knows are hostile to its agenda? So when you get a dramatic change in government, there’s a cynicism and suspicion that comes almost automatically. Then the job of the civil service is to wear down that hostility and cynicism, and establish that it really is an attendant committed to implementing the agenda of the new government. As that trust is developed, as it was during the Mulroney era, then things move forward. It’s a little early in this government’s mandate to know if it’s going to get there.

**Is there a trend for politicians or ministries to look outward for strategic advice rather than downward into the bureaucracy?**

Yes. It’s been ever thus. Part of is human nature. When there’s someone you know very well there’s a mystique for someone you don’t know who’s allegedly an expert. Second of all, when you’re suspicious of peoples’ motives or objectives, as a new government may be with the existing civil service, you want a reality check sometimes. You want somebody from the outside who doesn’t have the baggage to come in and give you advice. On a third level, the civil service is not supposed to give political advice, but all political leaders require political advice. So often, consultants are brought in to deal with
the communications and politics because the civil servants themselves really don’t want to mix into that. And, sometimes you need outside or third party expert advice just as a check and balance on the internal advice. Lastly, as government was downsized year after year, a lot of the policy capacity and some of the communications capacity was eliminated or atrophied, so governments went outside. Now its been built back up but in the current government’s case there’s a lot of mistrust of the civil services, so communications is done largely by the minister’s offices and outside consultants who are generally affiliated with the Conservatives.

**What about policy advice?**

In some ministries they don’t want policy advice from the bureaucracy because they don’t trust them. In other cases, they want a broader set of options than the bureaucrats are willing to give them. You know, part of this “speaking truth to power” means favouring options that you believe to be the truth right? And thirdly, civil servants are generally reasonably expert but they’re not the only pool or always the best pool of expertise. There are people in the private sector who make a lot more money and have a lot more experience and expertise with things the civil service don’t deal with on a regular basis. So you want to use the outside expertise.

Look, the Governor General’s civil servants were not expert enough to talk about 300 years of tradition on proroguing, so she called in the country’s constitutional experts. That’s the most kind of benign example, but it’s a reasonable example.

There are all sorts of complex policy where you really need to canvas expert opinion in the country or in a sector. It improves things to get a variety of expert opinions. That minister who is ultimately accountable wants some comfort that he or she really understands the complexity of a particular issue or the options that were available to them. That requires outside expertise and I don’t see anything wrong with it.

**And it’s not detrimental to the role of the role of the public servant then? The deputy minister?**

Well a competent deputy minister will manage that process and make sure a variety of inputs are heard.
But sure, it can be terribly damaging. There are current ministries relying almost entirely on outside advice, disregarding policy advice from within the department. I mean it’s not a secret and it’s obviously the case that the Department of Justice does not agree with virtually all the law and order agenda that the government is proposing.

**So with that said, how does a senior public servant do their job in that context?**

Well they have two basic choices: they can resign on principle, or, do what they’re supposed to do and implement the government’s policy. If they think government policy is wrong and going to do harm, then they have an ethical dilemma. They have to resolve the conflict between their job as a deputy minister to implement the policy and their job as a citizen or professional to ensure that harm isn’t done. And, that is a difficult thing for people to do. Some, very few, resign on principle, and others kind of punker down and convince themselves that the government is within its rights to implement the policy and it wont do significant damage.

These are not clean issues. Nobody elected a deputy minister to speak truth to power, or even to determine what the truth is. Why would a civil servant have a better grasp on the truth than a politician? It’s not inherently true.

I understand. Politicians’ motives are venal and civil servants are not, I get all that stuff. But, in a democratic system where there’s accountability, I’m not sure I want someone who is appointed and literally could almost never be fired, to be the guardian of the truth.