

Douglas Fisher: politician and journalist, 1957-2006. Canadian political journalism practiced by the participant observer.

By

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Abstract

In 1957 Douglas Fisher began a 50-year career as a politician and journalist in Canada. He became a politician-journalist then a political columnist, television host and commentator who took on a series of other policy roles. Throughout his career Fisher was a participant-observer, finding opportunities to write about his many interests. He was a “must-read” for many in the political elite and he became one of the most widely read political columnists in Canada.

As a politician Fisher wasn't content to limit himself to speaking in the House of Commons. He wrote for the *Canadian Forum* and the *Toronto Telegram*. As a journalist Fisher wrote columns for the *Telegram*, the *Toronto Sun* and other publications.

This paper surveys Fisher's career with special attention to the conflicts that he encountered as a participant-observer writing a syndicated political column.

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Introduction

On July 30, 2006, at the age of 85, Douglas Fisher ended his 45-year career as a newspaper political columnist. In his final column Fisher wrote that during his career he tried to convey “the opposition MP’s mentality into journalism. Over the years my opinions have been more critical than approving of whatever government has been in power.”¹ From 1961 to 2006 Fisher, alone in the Ottawa press gallery, knew what it was to be an opposition member of parliament. From 1957 to 1965 he served as the Cooperative Commonwealth Party member of parliament for the riding of Port Arthur in northern Ontario and while other Canadian federal politicians have occasionally dabbled in journalism only Fisher took it on full time.²

Political journalism is a specialized niche. Only a handful of journalists focus on covering politics and even fewer become political columnists. Some take the formal route by going to a journalism program in university and then taking a series of jobs, perhaps municipal or provincial political reporting, until attaining a position in Ottawa. Others learn the skills of journalism on the fly from editors and colleagues in newsrooms with the foundation of a university degree.

Occasionally a journalist will come to the craft late in life after exploring a number of different fields and slowly recognizing that what he or she really wants to do is journalism. Fisher was one such latecomer. He wrote his first political column in 1957 a few weeks after winning a seat in parliament. In December 1961 he started writing a column every Saturday for the *Toronto Telegram*. Fisher decided to leave

¹ Fisher, Douglas, *Toronto Sun*, July 30, 2006.

² Sheila Copps and Paul Hellyer are two examples but neither was a member of the press gallery covering the day-to-day doings of the House of Commons.

politics when the 1965 election was called opting to become a full-time journalist. Even then Fisher would always be more than a journalist. As a columnist, television interviewer and host, labour negotiator, and lobbyist, Fisher became an institution on parliament hill and in the Ottawa press gallery. His years in Parliament as a “maverick MP” and his growing profile as a journalist also meant Canadians came to know and look for his political opinions.

Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney first met Fisher as an 18-year-old student in Nova Scotia. Mulroney and Fisher’s paths crossed regularly for almost fifty years.

I think it is fair to say that for many years Doug was known as the dean of the parliamentary press gallery and very highly regarded and very straightforward. A man of strong views, strong opinions and unafraid to articulate it, to voice them.³

Fisher never studied journalism or worked in a newsroom and his writing was almost always in the form of a column. Sometimes it would stray from politics but the format was always the same. Whether writing for the *Canadian Forum*, the *Toronto Telegram* and *Toronto Sun*, the *Legion Magazine* or his various other contributions to journals and magazines Fisher was a columnist who primarily focused on federal politics. Fisher wrote for the *Toronto Telegram*, until it folded in 1971, and then for the *Toronto Sun* until July 2006. Between 1957 and 1964 while a member of parliament for the riding of Port Arthur, Fisher wrote an occasional column called “Commons Comment” for the *Canadian Forum*.

As early as 1957, he also saw the potential of television as a medium for journalism in public affairs. He was one of the pioneers in using local television in his successful campaign for a seat in parliament that same year. For the next eight years,

³ Mulroney, Brian, (telephone interview) interview with the author, March 27, 2009.

as a member of parliament, Fisher focused on broadcasting as a member of the House of Commons Special Committee on Broadcasting responsible for overseeing the activities of the *CBC* and broadcasting issues. In the 1960s Fisher began another long career as the host of a series of television programs about politics. He was a commentator for *CTV News* on major political events, such as leadership conventions, and a regular panelist on the weekly *CTV* program “Question Period” and a regular commentator on *CJOH* in Ottawa.

As a politician Fisher had a wide range of policy interests but he focused on four policy issues: forestry, transportation, broadcasting and sports. He was also involved in aboriginal issues and parliamentary reform. When he left politics to make his living as a journalist, Fisher’s passion for all these issues continued. His first editor at the *Toronto Sun*, Peter Worthington, says it was Fisher’s many interests that made him so valuable as a columnist. “He was kind of a renaissance man in the sense that he read books, he did political stuff, the sports stuff. He did virtually everything.”⁴

Douglas Fisher’s career put him in a unique position in Canadian political journalism. To define and explain this I will borrow a term from ethnography and human studies, participant observation, and apply it to Fisher’s approach to life and his journalism. Danny Jorgensen in *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies* writes:

The methodology of participant observation seeks to uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense of their daily lives. In placing the meaning of everyday life first, the methodology of participant observation differs from approaches that begin with concepts defined by way of existing theories and hypotheses...In short, then, the methodology of

⁴ Worthington, Peter, (telephone interview) interview with the author, April 28, 2009.

participant observation provides direct experiential and observational access to the insiders' world of meaning.⁵

Fisher, from his first days in politics, used "observational access" to become a participant observer. "Ethnography in contemporary settings increasingly involves the study of people in one's own culture in settings that, for example, often stress work and display spatial diffuseness and ethnic heterogeneity."⁶ I will argue that Fisher, as a member of parliament, was a participant-observer. He took his "case study" and from his first days as a politician applied the experience to journalism. After he left parliament he undertook a series of roles as an active participant-observer while continuing to write a regular column from Ottawa.

Canadian journalism has a long tradition of journalists participating in the political process. Newspapers were known for their strong affiliation with political parties and their lead political reporters often had close ties to politicians. In some cases this went so far as to provide advice and even lend a hand with the writing of speeches. Men such as Grant Dexter and Bruce Hutchison are examples of journalists who maintained a close rapport with political leaders. One oft-repeated example of this is in 1958 when Prime Minister Pearson handpicked Hutchison to fly to Ottawa from his journalism assignment in Washington to conduct a television interview on *CBC* TV. Hutchison recalled the harried preparations just before the live interview in his memoir *The Far Side of the Street*. "Between us we worked out half a dozen simple questions for me to ask him and I jotted them down on an envelope."⁷ Former Prime

⁵ Jorgensen, Danny, *Participant observation: a methodology for human studies*, (Newbury Park, Cal., Sage Publications, 1989), pg. 15.

⁶ Johnson, Jeffrey and Christine Avenarius and Jack Weatherford, "Active Participant-Observer: Applying Social Role Analysis to Participant Observation," *Field Methods*, May 2006. pg. 132.

⁷ Hutchison, *The Far Side of the Street*, (Toronto, Macmillan, 1976) pg. 247.

Minister Jean Chretien acknowledges Hutchison's influence. "A guy like Bruce Hutchison from the *Vancouver Province* would come to Ottawa and meet all the ministers and discuss the ministries with everybody and he had a lot of influence on us."⁸

However, during this period, these relationships between journalists and politicians usually took place behind the scenes. Readers knew the political take of their newspapers but the relationships, the active participation of political journalists, was not disclosed when the reporter was in the observer role. Conflict of interest was defined more loosely than today and it allowed for much greater direct influence by journalists in the political process.

Douglas Fisher, however, came at his role as a participant-observer through his election to parliament. He was first an MP, accountable to parliament and his constituency, and secondly an observer. This unique entry point raises conflict of interest issues for Fisher as a journalist during his years as an elected politician and later as a participant in the development of public policy. As a politician Fisher had an access to information that no journalist could obtain directly. He was allowed in the lobbies of parliament. He was conscious of the concerns of his party's leadership about his journalist. He recalls his party's leader in the House, Stanley Knowles "was particularly concerned about the kind of things that would shred the unity of the caucus."⁹ Unlike the journalists who had the ear of politicians Fisher came to his journalism from the inside with a voice and vote in parliament that itself was subject to reporting by the Ottawa press gallery. Fisher acknowledges that advantage he had

⁸ Chretien, Jean, (telephone) interview with the author, May 19, 2009.

⁹ Fisher interview with the author, November 9, 2008.

because of his unique relationship to his contacts. “It gave me great power. Some people didn’t like and it most people didn’t know.”¹⁰

How did Fisher use this privileged information in his journalism? His stated intention was to “write an intelligent column for readers who were interested in politics with some seriousness.”¹¹ However did his various participant roles during his career place him in a conflict of interest as a journalist? The issue of conflict of interest is muddied by the fact that Fisher was a columnist. His work was never on the news pages of the newspapers that ran his journalism and, on television, he only appeared on public affairs programs. Formal conflict of interest rules are applied to journalists assigned to the news pages and newscasts but the rules are much less clear for columnists. Through the use of specific examples the thesis will explore the ethical issues Fisher, and his editors dealt with.

One specific post-politics active participant-observer example I will explore was Fisher’s involvement in sport policy. From its inception in 1969 until it folded in the 1990s Fisher was on the board of directors of Hockey Canada. Chris Lang was the secretary treasurer of Hockey Canada and says Fisher was “the key, principal thinker on Hockey Canada in terms of strategy.”¹² Lang also says Fisher was “the guy that single-handedly got us a Minister of Sport in 1976. He single-handedly did that. Sport was going nowhere and Doug felt that to make it go somewhere it should have a cabinet thing and he single-handedly got that done, there is no question about that.”¹³

¹⁰ Fisher interview with the author, November 9, 2008.

¹¹ Fisher, interview with the author, March 17, 2009.

¹² Lang, Chris, interview with the author, May 19, 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

Twice, in the 1960s, Fisher participated as a politician as well. He ran for Parliament in 1968 and then sought the nomination for a by-election in Manitoba in 1969. While he was unsuccessful on both occasions he continued as a columnist during these campaigns and wrote about his experiences, using them to reflect on the politics of the day. I will argue that Fisher used his knowledge of life in the political arena to become a journalist with the credentials to cover and expound on politics in a way that no other Canadian political columnist could. Fisher's "inside knowledge" says former Prime Minister Jean Chretien gave him "an understanding of the functioning of political parties in parliament better than anybody from the outside."¹⁴

The regular political column on the editorial-opinion page of newspapers was just starting in Canada when Fisher came to Ottawa. The *Winnipeg Free Press* was one of the few newspapers that ran political columns usually by Grant Dexter, the paper's associate editor based in Ottawa, and Victor MacKie. The format was already widely used in the United States. For years newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* had regular columnists and some were syndicated across in the United States. They reported on the politics and policy choices made in Washington and opined on international news as well. In the mid-fifties American columnists like Joseph Alsop and Walter Lippmann were syndicated across Canada as well in papers such as the *Toronto Telegram* and *Montreal Gazette*. So the development of a Canadian political column gave readers of the editorial-opinion pages of Canadian newspapers a regular Canadian perspective for the first time.

Covering politics has always been a central part of Canadian journalism. In the 1950s a handful of reporters had great influence. Bruce Hutchison, editor of the

¹⁴ Chretien, interview with the author, May 19, 2009

Victoria Times, wrote speeches for the Liberal leader, and then Prime Minister, Lester Pearson. Blair Fraser, Ottawa editor for Maclean's, also was close to the leadership of the Liberal party. Tom Kent was editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* between 1954 and 1959.

Hutchison and Fraser were, for example, very much, what shall we say, inclined to give their private opinions to politicians. Politicians asked for them and so journalists gave them. But it was all a much smaller clubbier world. It was really taken for granted I would say.¹⁵

The *Globe and Mail* introduced George Bain and his "Ottawa Letter" column in early 1955. A few weeks later the *Toronto Star* picked up columnist Charles Woodsworth then in June 1956, Peter Stursberg replaced Woodsworth. In both newspapers the columns appeared on the editorial page and ran two or three times a week. All three journalists had held various other reporting and editing positions before being given the role of a political columnist. In September 1955 the *Montreal Gazette* added a daily political column by Arthur Blakely. Called "Ottawa day-by-day" Blakely's column ran Monday to Friday.

I will argue that the creation of the political columnist was a response to the need to provide more analytical journalism as the role and import of the federal government grew. It was a coming of age for Canadian journalism. In an M.A. thesis, written in 1962, Colin Seymour-Ure wrote.

The Gallery reactions are herd reactions. This is bad in itself, but it also encourages chasing the same stories and a concern with the anticipation of news...The gallery cat chases its tail. To try and anticipate the news is a sound principle, but it should not be done at the expense of analyzing what is already known.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kent, Tom, (telephone interview) interview with the author, April 1, 2009.

¹⁶ Seymour-Ure, Colin, *Inquiry into the position and workings of the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa*, M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1962. pg. 163.

The need to look deeper into the policies, role and politics of Canada required a new kind of journalist who was not focused solely on reporting the news of the day from the House of Commons. Douglas Fisher was among that first generation of Canadian political columnists and in the 1960s he became an innovator on another level by taking on a partner to share the column duties and the byline. Harry Crowe, an historian at York University, shared the writing duties for three years.

The political column was also a response to the advent of radio and television news. Radio reported hourly on political developments in Ottawa while both radio and television presented the news in the evening. Newspapers needed to find new avenues to hold readers and provide different information. Some of the columnists in Ottawa in the 1950s were contracted by radio and television to present commentaries and this increased their profiles and salaries as columnists. In the 1960s Fisher would follow and build on that model developing a following on television.

As a participant-observer Fisher faced potential conflicts of interest. First, as a politician, his columns in the *Canadian Forum* raised questions within the caucus of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party where he sat as a member. Fisher acknowledges the tensions in caucus. “Where it breaks down is the pressure if you get a live topic. You will always have...it’s your colleagues that will raise hell. I think Stanley Knowles was sometimes beside himself. What was I going to raise?”¹⁷ Then as a full time journalist there were other conflicts for Fisher and his editors. He ran for parliament, advised a series of cabinet ministers on a number of issues and worked as a labour negotiator all the while writing a column, hosting a weekly

¹⁷ Fisher interview, November 9, 2008.

television program and making other television appearances as an interviewer and commentator.

Today, most Canadian news agencies maintain guidelines for journalists warning them to be wary of potential conflicts of interest. For example the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation guidelines state:

Employees are required to disclose, in writing, to their immediate supervisor all business, commercial or financial interest, where such interest might conceivably be construed as being in actual, apparent or potential conflict with their duties to the Corporation.¹⁸

This thesis will consider the journalism issues that Fisher, as a participant-observer faced. Fisher became a unique combination of politician, lobbyist and journalist. How did his employers, the editors and producers, deal with the disclosure of his various roles? Fisher compartmentalized his different interests to accomplish his goals in journalism and in public policy. So, while Fisher, the journalist, did not take a salary for any of his policy work, there were a significant number of occasions when his readers and viewers were not fully aware of his many interests. Fisher's unique position as participant-observer did, at times, place him in what might be construed as a conflict of interest.

On the other hand, as a participant-observer, Fisher brought a perspective and approach that other journalists did not have. His political background gave him an access that other columnists in this era did not have. Politicians sought him out for off-the-record advice and Fisher didn't hold back from giving his opinions.

Throughout his career as a journalist, politicians saw him as someone who had been "one of them". Former Prime Minister Chretien says, "If Doug would tell me it was

¹⁸ <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/docs/policies/journalistic/conflict/shtml>

off record I had no problem. I would sleep very well.”¹⁹ Fisher always chose to be part of the political process, be it in the halls of the House of Commons, the parliamentary cafeteria, then in the West Block, the offices of Cabinet Ministers or giving his opinions to committees of parliament.

This paper will be divided into four chapters. The first will look at Fisher’s life. Using interviews with Douglas Fisher as well as other biographical material and interviews he conducted earlier in his career I will show what shaped a boy from northern Ontario into one of the most widely read columnists in Canada.

Chapter two will review his role as a politician with an interest in journalism and broadcasting. I will use the interviews with Fisher as well as the record of his contributions in the House of Commons and in his committee work. Fisher began his journalism while an MP. At this stage Fisher, the participant-observer, was first a politician and secondly a journalist. This will be assessed to consider the conflicts and opportunities this early foray into journalism presented. I will review his role in the CCF and NDP and his rise from backbencher to deputy leader. Fisher was an early adopter of the power of the media and its influence grew during his political career.

The third, and central, chapter will focus on Fisher’s journalism after he left politics but continued to participate in various public policy issues. Now Fisher was more an observer-participant as he wrote a daily column and in the 1970s appeared as a regular panelist on Canada’s most important weekly political television program, *CTV*’s “Question Period”. He hosted or produced a variety of other television programs and was a regular contributor to news programming on *CJOH* television in Ottawa. I will review his writing and, where possible, the programs he was involved

¹⁹ Chretien interview, May 19, 2009.

with. It is in this period that Fisher undertook a number of different roles as participant.

Moreover it is critical to explore the issues of disclosure and conflict of interest in Fisher's work. How did Fisher and his editors make his readers and viewers aware of his many roles as a participant-observer? Could a columnist today be an active participant-observer?

It is also important to place his work in the context of other columnists. I will review two-week periods, one during the 1968 federal election and the other the last days of the Meech Lake Accord in June 1990, to explore the differences and similarities between Fisher's work and that of Ottawa columnists writing for the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail*.

The conclusion will assess Fisher's contribution to political journalism. I will argue that the participant-observer as political columnist brings a valuable perspective to readers, listeners and viewers. In Fisher's last *Toronto Sun* column he lamented "the growing irrelevance of the House as the dramatic, dynamic stage of the parliamentary system." He wrote the future for Canada was filled with opportunity but the politician's voice rings in his last words that there will only be a "better society...if we cultivate our politics sensibly."²⁰

²⁰ Fisher, Douglas, "In Closing Mr Speaker..." *Toronto Sun*, July 30, 2006.

Chapter 1

The Early Years

Sioux Lookout, in northwestern Ontario, incorporated as a town in 1912 and served as a railway junction for the National Transcontinental Railway. Not much more than a village, it was named after a nearby mountain and there is an aboriginal tale that goes with it. Legend has it that Sioux Lookout provided a vantage point from which to see on-coming attackers. Even today the masthead of the *Sioux Lookout Bulletin* shows an aboriginal with his hand to his brow surveying the horizon.²¹

Douglas Mason Fisher was born here on September 19, 1919. Like the aboriginal gazing out across the rapids for danger Fisher would spend much of his life serving, observing, thinking and opining about his country.

The son of a railway engineer Fisher went to elementary school in Sioux Lookout. He told Tom Earle, in his oral history, that he was four when he started reading the sports pages of the *Winnipeg Tribune* and his life-long love of reading got its start early. Fisher says he's been reading books since the age of seven.²² A three-page "profile" of Fisher in the CCF/NDP papers says "he was a child prodigy at the local public school, graduating with top marks at the age of 10."²³ In 1932 his parents

²¹ www.siouxbulletin.com

²² Fisher to Earle, pg. 1.

²³ CCF/NDP Papers, "Profile – Douglas Fisher," May 1965, pg. 1, MG28, IV 1, Volume 447, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

moved to Fort William so that Fisher and his brother could attend high school in a bigger community.

We both went to high school with dubious results. I don't think my brother ever finished high school and neither did I, although I spent more time than my brother in high school – seven years.²⁴

When he arrived in Fort William a cousin introduced him to the public library. Fisher discovered that the reading room was filled with books and newspapers. “They had the *St. Louis Dispatch* and the *Chicago Tribune*, and of course the Canadian newspapers. I became a fan of the American newspapers, particularly the *Chicago Tribune*.”²⁵

As a teenager Fisher was keenly interested in sports. He played many and also covered minor league hockey games for the local newspaper. “I had a very early interest in sport, particularly in baseball...I just dived into the American newspapers, and of course you spread out from the sports section.”²⁶

His father instilled in him an interest in politics. He remembers his father, a life-long Liberal supporter, putting him to work as an “errand boy”²⁷ during the 1935 federal election campaign. “I was a messenger for the local Liberal hack, a guy by the name of Don Donnelly, a real old Irish Liberal”²⁸

In 1938 Fisher dropped out of high school, and left Fort William, to work as a miner at a gold mine in Pickle Lake. He organized the miners to sign a petition to prevent the mine from making a new deduction from their pay. Although the petition

²⁴ Oral History project, Mr. Douglas Fisher,” Ottawa. Interviewed by Tom Earle, May 1993, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, pg. 1.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Fisher, Douglas, *Legion Magazine*, January 1984, pg. 4.

²⁸ *ibid.*

succeeded, the mine owners fired Fisher for his involvement in the petition drive. It was one of the first of a long series of efforts by Fisher to challenge authorities or, as he says, “to stir the pot”. With his mining days over Fisher turned to logging jobs in the area and got in at least one scrap with the law. After being caught with some buddies stealing gas the local magistrate suggested Fisher find something to do to “show that he has better intentions than to sit around stealing gas.”²⁹ Fisher took the hint and signed up in the army.

He enlisted in Winnipeg and served as a private in the 12th Manitoba Dragoons. When he was stationed in England in 1944 awaiting deployment to France, Fisher couldn't stay away from politics, working on a by-election in West Derbyshire. This violated military rules but he spent his days off campaigning for the independent Labour candidate who beat the Conservative candidate. His superiors also looked the other way when he and some army buddies showed their political colours.

We talked a lot of politics in the regiment. Then we got these black overalls...Pearse and I cut a stencil “Vote CCF”, and of course there were all kinds of guys willing to have “Vote CCF” stenciled on and I guess we got about a dozen who did it...So when we went to France, I and a few others were wearing “Vote CCF” on our backs.³⁰

Like many soldiers Fisher wrote a lot during the war. He used his letters home to “make statements if you want.” He wanted his letters to get past the censors. “I tried to develop a skill at something that would try to mock them and yet wasn't so petty and silly that they wouldn't have the gall to push it on and cut me.”³¹ He challenged military authority time and again. “Of the group of us I would say that it wasn't that

²⁹ Fisher interview to Earle, Pg. 4.

³⁰ Fisher interview to Earle, pg. 10.

³¹ Fisher interview, Oct. 17, 2008.

we weren't cooperative. We were proud of our group and so on, but we didn't respect authority very much."³²

Fisher's war experience was an important part of his early life. He fought in Europe as a trooper from Normandy to Germany and the lessons of war stayed with him. He remembered it this way in his last column for the *Legion Magazine*, "I felt like a tiny grain in a huge mass of Allied soldiers. Nevertheless I believe the majority of my comrades in our unit, in our army, indeed in our several armies, were with me then and now (wherever they are)."³³

When the war ended Fisher returned to Canada arriving in Quebec City on VJ Day. His father pushed Fisher to "further his education."³⁴ He used his status as a veteran to attend Victoria College at the University of Toronto taking courses in English and history. Northrop Frye was one of his first professors. Frye enthralled Fisher who took five of Frye's courses while at Victoria. Fisher also entered campus politics and contributed to the *Acta Victoriana*, the Victoria College student magazine, editing it in 1949. Frye noted Fisher's activities in his diary on February 8. At a meeting of the Victoria College Union (VCU) Frye commented: "Fisher himself seems to have made an excellent speech. The main attack came from the VCU President Keith Davey."³⁵ A few weeks later, on April 5, Frye wrote, "Doug Fisher was in – another big VCU row – motion of censure on Acta defeated by one vote."³⁶ At that meeting Fisher introduced a motion calling for reform of the Victoria College Union executive.

³² Fisher interview to Earle, pg. 10.

³³ Fisher, Douglas, *Legion Magazine*, March/April, 2005, pg. 88.

³⁴ Fisher to Earle, pg. 12.

³⁵ Frye, Northrop, *The Diaries of Northrop Frye, 1942-55, Volume 8*, Robert Denham, editor, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001) pg. 119.

³⁶ *ibid*, pg. 177.

Whereas the VCU Assembly as constituted at present has lamentably failed to carry on its business with any kind of dispatch or dignity, perhaps because of its size, perhaps because the members are incapable of parliamentary procedure.³⁷

The President of the Assembly, Keith Davey, responded. “We all know the mover of this motion is the magazine’s editor; however because of the rather cheap attack to which I personally have been subjugated to in the most recent issue of that journal, I feel, Mr. Chairman, that some reply is in order.”³⁸ The active participant-observer is already at work. Fisher used his position as editor of the *Acta Victoriana* to report on events he participated in as a member of the Victoria College executive.

Keith Davey, would go on in life to be a key Liberal Party backroom operator and then a Senator. In his memoir he acknowledged Fisher’s leadership role at Victoria College.

I would inevitably clash with Doug Fisher...In these post-war years, we had come from two different worlds: I was fresh from high school and Fisher was returning to university like thousands of others who had served over-seas and whose lives had accordingly been turned inside out. We became leaders of our respective groups.³⁹

Davey was just one of the important connections Fisher made at Victoria College. Future cabinet ministers, Paul Hellyer and Judy LaMarsh as well as *CBC* reporter Norman DePoe were at university with Fisher. He recalls, “There was quite a cast who later went on to become deputy ministers and that kind of thing.”⁴⁰ The 1965 Fisher profile in the NDP papers gives a sense of what it called his “rebellious spirit” in his university days. “He stirred up a protest march when students were cut down to

³⁷ Keith Davey Fonds, “Fisher motion,” Box 28 File 5, April 4, 1949. E.J Pratt Library Victoria College, Toronto.

³⁸ Keith Davey Fonds, “Keith Davey speech notes,” Box 28, File 5, E.J. Pratt Library Victoria College, Toronto.

³⁹ Davey, Keith, *The Rainmaker*, (Toronto, Stoddard Publishing, 1986) pg. 3.

⁴⁰ Fisher interview to Earle, Pg. 13

one glass of milk at breakfast, even managing to smuggle a cow onto campus to lead the parade.”⁴¹

Fisher wrote a couple of short stories and articles for the *Acta Victoriana*. His longest article is about the state of professional hockey in the winter of 1948. His conclusion, written more than 60 years ago, rings true today.

The trends have largely turned a fierce, competitive team sport into a thrilling high-priced entertainment. If you doubt this, why the long schedules and the laughable intricateness of all play-off arrangements? This emphasis on entertainment has permeated through the hockey system and into the corner lot. The kids emulate the big stars down to the last wicked glare at the referee. I think hockey as a sport is in jeopardy.⁴²

Frye was the faculty advisor on the *Acta Victoriana* and he was also on the editorial board of the left-wing *Canadian Forum* magazine. He encouraged Fisher to contribute pieces to the *Forum*. The first, published in August 1950, was a light take on professional wrestling. Fisher wrote the “simulation is unbelievably good” and concluded that the popularity of wrestling “reveals that Canadians, or at least many of them, are not so staid in expressing their emotions as we’ve been led to believe.”⁴³ These first contributions to the *Canadian Forum* had a populist touch. They focused on topics like wrestling, the parts of Toronto where he got the best tips selling beer door to door, and again, hockey.⁴⁴

What emerges from these early years is a young man, as he himself put it, “resentful of authority” and looking for opportunities to make a mark. Fisher was a big man, six foot five and nearing 240 pounds. He was full of contradictions. He loved sports and

⁴¹ CCF/NDP Papers, “Profile – Douglas Fisher,” May 1965, pg. 2.

⁴² Fisher, Douglas, *Acta Victoriana*, February 1948, pg. 30.

⁴³ Fisher, Douglas, “Circuses and Kings,” *Canadian Forum*, August 1950, pg. 106

⁴⁴ Fisher referenced the beer tipping story in his maiden speech in the House of Commons in 1957. Canadian Press picked up the anecdote and it was carried in Toronto newspapers.

wrote about sports even in his teens but he could also write a tender story about a Canadian veteran returning to an English town seven years after the war for the *Acta Victoriana*. Northrop Frye picked up on this in his diary entry of April 5, 1949 writing Fisher is “going to Library School, of all places. His tastes are more consistently bookish than I thought they would be”⁴⁵ The University of Toronto historian, Frank Underhill, another one of Fisher’s professors wrote, “he hasn’t quite mastered the art of expressing everything that is in his mind. But he knows that it is an art, and I hope he gets the chance to go out and do experiments with himself.”⁴⁶ For Fisher his years at Victoria College shaped his worldview and he credits Frye and Underhill for being his main influences and shaping his attitudes and positions.⁴⁷

The decision to major in library sciences showed a practical side to Fisher. He was older than many of the other students and he knew he needed to choose a subject that would give him a skill. Fisher thrived on reading he wanted to know as much as possible about everything the library was where information resided. In 1993 Fisher told Earle, “I’m still writing as a journalist, you know, some forty years later, on what library school showed me.”⁴⁸

It was at the University of Toronto that Fisher met and married his first wife librarian Barbara Lamont. After his graduation with honours in history and library science the couple made plans to go to London, England for a year so Fisher could study archives administration at University College. Underhill’s letter of recommendation for a scholarship rated Fisher’s academic abilities this way. “He was

⁴⁵ Frye, Diaries, pg. 177.

⁴⁶ Frank Underhill Fonds, Underhill letter to the Secretary of the Beaver Club Trust, December 19, 1949, MG 30 – D204 Volume 4, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

⁴⁷ Fisher to Earle, pg. 174.

⁴⁸ Fisher to Earle, pg. 14.

one of the two or three best men in a very good group. He is very interested in ideas and has a philosophical capacity which most students lack. He is also interested in literary style, which is unusual in a student of history.”⁴⁹

Fisher wrote Underhill on June 5, 1950 to tell him he did not get the scholarship but that he would still go to London. He wondered why he didn’t get it. “It may have been the personal impression I made. However, from the trend of the interview, it was likely a feeling that archives was a minor and limited field. Certainly they never got around to ideas or theories.” He ended the letter asking if he could send “observations on the English scene” to Underhill and gave this characterization of his political view at the time “as it looks to what I hope is a liberal (with a small ‘l’).”⁵⁰

In a letter to Underhill on October 10, 1950 Fisher wrote about the British press.

The newspapers have been my best contact with the country so far and their standard seems lower than during the war. Sex, crime, Hollywood, and football pools dominate while all the papers but the Herald and the Mirror warp every news item into a pike at the government, much as does the Globe and Mail but with even less subtlety.⁵¹

With his librarian education completed Fisher now chose a position at Queen’s University working at the university’s library. For the next year and a half, Fisher organized the library and established a government documents section. This experience allowed Fisher to learn much about the history of government in Canada because as Fisher put it “Queen’s became the model university for gathering government publications from the federal government, the provinces, the United

⁴⁹ Underhill Fonds.

⁵⁰ Underhill Fonds, Fisher letter to Frank Underhill, June 5, 1950, MG 30 – D204, Volume 4.

⁵¹ Underhill Fonds, Fisher letter to Underhill, October 10, 1950, MG 30 – D204, Volume 4.

States, Britain and so on.”⁵² It provided him with an expertise that few politicians or journalists had when he ended up in Ottawa five years later. Another plus for Fisher was that his time at Queen’s became a “crash course in academe and the state of academe and scholarly research.”⁵³ He worked on a Masters part-time and considered his next step.

He wrote Underhill asking for his thoughts on a library position in Toronto. “Nearing thirty-five and with one child, one cannot afford to continue in a field which promises to be very restricted and offers either a poor living or the continuance of my wife at work.”⁵⁴

In the summer of 1953 Fisher opted to go back to Fort William to set up a research library for foresters at the Lakehead Technical Institute. He saw it as an opportunity to combine his profession as a librarian with his keen interest in forestry. “The challenge that came to me ...your home town! This is something that only you can pull off.”⁵⁵ The hope was that the library would eventually “become an integral part of the proposed Lakehead College.”⁵⁶ When the man in charge of the project died suddenly Fisher decided that the project was too tenuous to continue and he took up a teaching position at Port Arthur Collegiate Institute. For the next two years Fisher taught English and history. Fisher enjoyed the teaching and he now had a young family to keep him busy but that was not enough for a man who always loved to fill his days with a variety of interests.

⁵² Fisher interview to Earle interview pg 15

⁵³ *ibid.* pg. 15

⁵⁴ Underhill Fonds, Fisher letter to Underhill, June 13, 1953, MG 30 – D204, Volume 4.

⁵⁵ Fisher interview, October 17, 2008.

⁵⁶ Fisher, D.M, “Report on the Forest Library of Northwestern Ontario, 1953-1954, September 1954”, Lakehead University Library, Thunder Bay, pg. 1.

Fisher gained a reputation in the area as someone to call on to help solve problems with government bureaucracies. For example he worked with the town of Nipigon to lobby for a pulp mill in the town. He chuckled as he told the story.

I drafted this five or 10 page letter putting the case with hearts and flowers and tears and sent it off and, by god, if they didn't get an invitation to send a delegation of at least thirty or forty local citizens to the Ontario Legislature and (Premier) Leslie Frost. Within a week I had every little municipality up at that end of the lake. Get hold of him and he'll write a good letter for you.⁵⁷

He took on individual cases helping people seeking workers' compensation or other responses from government. He recalled, "my wife would go to the door and there'd be somebody with a compensation case."⁵⁸ Fisher did this work for free occasionally getting paid for any expenses he might incur. Sports continued to be part of his life and Fisher did publicity and writing for the Junior Hockey League and the Amateur Football League in the Lakehead and did his first broadcasting as a colour commentator on radio for both sports.

Even at this early stage in his life Fisher showed his interest in being a participant-observer. From his first teen-age efforts to play and write about sports in Port Arthur, then his active university years where he got involved in university politics and journalism and his community work as a teacher, Fisher always looked for ways to reflect and report on his work.

⁵⁷ Fisher interview, October 17, 2008.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

The Politician

In the fall of 1956 Fisher was 37, with three young children, when the idea of running for Parliament first came up. Fisher told Tom Earle about a high school class trip to the local arena to watch a speech by C.D. Howe, the long-time Liberal member for Port Arthur, and Prime Minister St. Laurent's powerful senior cabinet minister. During the rally another teacher, an active CCF member asked, "Doug, wouldn't you like to take a crack at the old bugger?"⁵⁹

A few weeks later, Donald MacDonald the leader of the Ontario CCF, met with Fisher to discuss the idea. A group of local CCF party members approached Fisher as well. Seven years earlier Fisher had declared himself a "small 'l' liberal but now, after four years of involvement in the community of the Lakehead, and honouring the CCF logo stenciled on his back as he went to fight in France, he decided to run for the socialist CCF. The Port Arthur CCF riding association met in the public library auditorium on the evening of March 22, 1957. Fisher easily won the nomination when a second candidate quickly withdrew.⁶⁰

When we decided we'd go we were determined. We put together a small committee of three or four people...and we went to work on everything you could do to get ready for an election campaign. In other words we were months ahead of the game.⁶¹

C.D. Howe had represented the riding for 22 years. He was one of the Liberal Party's key fund-raisers so he campaigned across the country. When the campaign began, Howe's team thought little of the high school teacher's chances. A Liberal

⁵⁹ Fisher interview with Earle, pg. 18.

⁶⁰ *Daily Times Journal*, Fort William, March 23, 1957, pg. 2.

⁶¹ Fisher interview with Earle, pg.19.

Party “memorandum composed in early April indicated, ‘no...seats are thought to be at stake’”⁶² in Northern Ontario. Fisher agreed. At the outset he put his chances at fifty-to-one.⁶³ Fisher raised money and decided to buy television time at the brand new station in Port Arthur and Fort William. The 1957 campaign was the first to use television in remote northern Ontario.

The station’s signal only covered a radius of about forty miles around Port Arthur and Fort William. A Liberal supporter owned the local station but the Howe campaign hadn’t thought to buy any time. Television “was not part of the political experience of any of Howe’s managers. They simply didn’t think of it.”⁶⁴ Fisher, on the other hand, understood television’s potential and maximized its use. He ran a series of folksy chats all delivered live. Fisher explained the use of television in an article in *The Canadian Forum*.

We could not count on anything more than indifference from the press; and very early we chose TV as our main medium, booking a number of 15-minute periods, increasing in frequency until the final night for TV, Friday, June 7. For that night I took the last half-hour the station was to be open; the other shows I tried to spot just before the \$64,000 Question. In presentation my aim was to do without scripts (there was no teleprompter), to use the arm-chair – fireplace setting, and to bring on a variety of people, almost all of whom would be publicly unknown.⁶⁵

During the week Fisher taught at the high school and in the evenings and on the weekends he toured the logging camps throughout the riding. Towards the end of May the Howe team started to worry. Howe’s campaign tour in western Canada was not going well. He endured hecklers at stop after stop for his part in managing the

⁶² Bothwell, Robert & William Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe: a biography*, (Toronto, McLelland and Stewart, 1979) pg. 324.

⁶³ *Winnipeg Free Press*, June 27, 1957.

⁶⁴ Bothwell & Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe*, pg. 327.

⁶⁵ Fisher, Douglas, “An Interesting Campaign,” *The Canadian Forum*, September 1957, pg. 1.

famous Pipeline debate in the House of Commons that had led to the election call.

“Howe got a frantic call from his campaign committee in Port Arthur. Things were going badly. He must come home immediately.”⁶⁶

Howe also had more money to spend on the local campaign but Fisher got important financial help from an unlikely source. Howe had made his share of enemies over the years and one was Cyrus Eaton, an American based businessman. “I got a telegram from Toronto and then a phone call informing me that several thousand dollars had been placed at my disposal. And shortly after the campaign I found out that Eaton had been one of the major contributors.”⁶⁷

The Howe campaign grew desperate. In the final days Howe raced out to the lumber camps but without support from the unions only a handful of loggers showed up.

Rumours began to fly that Fisher was sewing up the bush. Thus came respect from those inclined to dismiss us summarily. Mr. Howe helped. He convinced the TV management that the sign-off on June 7 should be delayed a half-hour so that he could follow my half-hour. On this telecast he forthrightly used the Labour progressives. “Would you want a young fellow down in Ottawa who was under Communist influence?”⁶⁸

Three days later, on a drizzly Monday evening, the voters gave Fisher an easy win and the moniker “the giant killer”.⁶⁹ The Liberals lost their majority and nine Liberal cabinet ministers lost their seats. The *Toronto Telegram* reported, “The biggest head to roll was C.D. Howe’s, minister of trade and commerce.” It went on to report Fisher “sitting quietly at home last night...credited the success of this campaign to two

⁶⁶ Bothwell & Kilbourn, C.D. Howe, pg. 326.

⁶⁷ Cyrus Eaton Fonds, transcript of *CBC* interview with Fisher for a program on Cyrus Eaton, 1976, Series 1, Box 1, File 18, McMaster University, Hamilton.

⁶⁸ Fisher, Douglas, “An Interesting Campaign”, The *Canadian Forum*, September, 1957, pg 144.

⁶⁹ The final result in Port Arthur was: Fisher, 12,228; Howe, 10,813; and Vigars (Conservative) 5,261.

strategies – the use of television and files” on Howe’s record.⁷⁰ The Conservative Party led by John Diefenbaker won a minority government and the CCF won three seats in Ontario gaining a foothold in the province for the first time.

The librarian turned teacher had bucked authority once more. He took his talent for organization, detail and oratory to the House of Commons in Ottawa. Fisher received a leave of absence from his teaching job, left his young family in Port Arthur, and took a room in Ottawa in a house with another newly elected Ontario CCF MP, Arnold Peters.

As a new member of the CCF caucus Fisher sat in the second last row at the far end away from the Speaker and three seats from the back of the chamber. In his first session, the *Hansard Debates Index* lists Fisher speaking to 94 issues including 31 questions in a short parliament that sat for less than four months.⁷¹ He worked hard to make an impression in Ottawa but also to make his mark with his constituents so that he would win re-election. Fisher predicted a big win for the Conservatives and worried about his re-election. On February 1, 1958 Diefenbaker saw his moment and called another election.

The Progressive Conservative Party swept the country. Support for the CCF collapsed and only eight CCF MPs were elected. However Fisher won handily in Port Arthur. He told his supporters on election night “Perhaps immodestly, we are taking the result in Port Arthur Riding as a personal and organizational triumph in

⁷⁰ *Toronto Telegram*, June 11, 1957, pg. 4.

⁷¹ Canada. House of Commons, *Hansard, Index*, Twenty-third Parliament, pg. 62.1957. On 17 issues Fisher spoke more than once. His roommate Arnold Peters spoke to 38 issues and asked three questions.

the light of the national trend”⁷² A few weeks later he resigned from his teaching position but his family stayed in Port Arthur.

The CCF named Fisher to three committee posts for the first session of the 24th Parliament: the standing committee on Railways, Canals and Telegraph Lines, a newly formed committee on Broadcasting and the committee on the Parliamentary Library. As the son of a railway engineer Fisher understood the importance of the railway. It was still the most important mode of transportation and a significant employer across the country. It was also vital to his constituents who relied on rail service for transportation, supplies and to move the resources of northern Ontario to markets in the south. Broadcasting and the *CBC* was also important to Fisher’s constituents who wanted access to television signals that were available only in urban areas. “I knew that if there was one subject my constituents were following it was television. So I went for that...also the *CBC* was a marvelous whipping boy because it was both the programmer and planner and so it ran the whole system.”⁷³

Fisher turned his interest in broadcasting, journalism and the *CBC* into a forum for headlines that gave him a significant political profile across the country. Throughout his parliamentary career Fisher picked high profile issues that were certain to get noticed by the reporters scribbling away in the press gallery above the Speaker’s chair.

⁷² *Daily Times Journal*, Fort Williams, April 1, 1958, pg. 1.

⁷³ Fisher interview, October 17, 2008.

Tom Earle, in his interview with Fisher, says Fisher became a “media star” in his first session as an MP.⁷⁴

Fisher became the chair of the small CCF caucus. The fifth and final session of the twenty-fourth parliament, in the spring of 1962, was also a short three-month session yet he spoke at least once to 149 issues including asking 52 questions.⁷⁵

The political leaders of the CCF, M.J. Coldwell and Stanley Knowles, were defeated in 1958 and the party leadership didn’t have much time for their eight members in the House. Even before the 1958 defeat, a faction of the CCF promoted the idea of forming a new party. This process sped up after the 1958 election.

The national executive took few pains to hide its view that the caucus was second rate and that it was incompetent and lacked the discipline and intellectual rigour of previous caucuses. The caucus, for its part, felt that its interests were being sacrificed in the interest of the new party and, in any case, it was unwilling to accept any direction from either the party executive or defeated members.⁷⁶

On February 19, 1959 the party secretary, Carl Hamilton, wrote David Lewis, then the party’s national president, and the tension between the party executive and caucus is evident in the dismissive tone.

There has been considerable concern in the caucus that they have not been able to hit as hard and get as much publicity this session. I must confess to taking a certain detached view of this situation because, in the longer run, the big things that will effect our future are not, I think what happens in the House.⁷⁷

In August 1960, now as the CCF caucus chair, Fisher wrote Hamilton and Lewis about Hamilton openly working against the leader of the CCF, Hazen Argue.

⁷⁴ Fisher to Earle, pg. 27.

⁷⁵ Canada, House of Commons, *Hansard Index*, 23rd Parliament, pg. 64-66. In this session Arnold Peters spoke to 75 issues and asked one question. On some issues both spoke more than once.

⁷⁶ Young, Walter, *The Anatomy of a Party*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969) pg. 235.

⁷⁷ CCF/NDP Papers, “Letter – Hamilton to Lewis,” February 19 1959, MG28 IV 1, Vol. 1 428, File 3, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

The caucus is much disturbed over Hamilton's own admission to the chairman of the caucus that he had been working with the "anti-Argue" forces.⁷⁸

Fisher's anger against Lewis spilled onto the pages of the *Canadian Forum's* September 1960 issue.

One continually hears in the CCF: "What does David say?" or "What does David think?" Mr. Lewis has tried several times without success to get elected to Parliament. Since he became the party master-mind, it has made no significant national gains.⁷⁹

The following chapter will discuss Fisher's role as a politician journalist and participant-observer more fully. What is clear is that three years after coming to Ottawa Fisher, as chair of the caucus, was fully engaged in the politics of his party and preparing to report more regularly on the events in Ottawa.

During the long twenty-fourth Parliament Fisher contemplated ways to supplement his income and one was to write for a newspaper.

What happened is it was quite simply a money thing. I was getting into overdrafts at the bank. My wife and I both hated the thought of debt and I was not going into the hole. So how am I going to make some money? I am not going to make money as a miner or as a teacher. Teacher work. How can you be a full-time MP and be a teacher? So I decided the only way to do it was to write.⁸⁰

Fisher contacted the three Toronto newspapers and settled on the *Toronto Telegram*. "I sent a copy of two trial columns and I got a phone call. I sent it in by wire and the next morning there was a wire from Big John (Bassett) saying you're on. We'll talk contract as soon as possible."⁸¹

⁷⁸ CCF/NDP Papers, "Letter - Fisher to Hamilton and Lewis," August 11 1960.

⁷⁹ Fisher, "The Last CCF Roundup," *Canadian Forum*, September 1960, pg. 122.

⁸⁰ Fisher interview, December 6, 2008.

⁸¹ Ibid.

On Saturday December 2, 1961 Fisher wrote his first weekly page seven column for the *Toronto Telegram*. Chapter three will look more closely at these columns but the *Telegram* introduced Fisher this way.

One of the most independent voices in Canadian politics speaks out on Page Seven. DOUGLAS FISHER, CCF member for Port Arthur, tells of the tactics used when politicians choose a new leader, and calls the odds on the PM's...HEIR APPARENT.⁸²

His column deal with John Bassett also included hosting a weekly television program on the Toronto CTV affiliate, *CFTO*. Bassett, owner of the *Telegram* also owned *CFTO*. That program, called “Doug Fisher and” began its run in the spring of 1964 initially on Saturdays at 4:30 p.m. The second program featured an interview with the Toronto MP Paul Hellyer.⁸³

Fisher also enhanced his profile amongst Canadians with a series of controversial statements about French Canada. These earned him more headlines, important contacts and a few opponents who opposed his views on Quebec. In 1961 at Laval in Quebec City Fisher told a conference organized by Brian Mulroney that a stripper, Lili St. Cyr, and the hockey player, Maurice Richard, formed English Canada’s perceptions of Quebec. Fisher recalled the fallout “I was a swear word in Quebec because of the Lili St. Cyr thing.”⁸⁴ His own party distanced itself from Fisher’s controversial statements.

On March 6, 1964 Fisher went to Montreal to debate Rene Levesque and, again, it produced headlines. The *CBC* program, “Inquiry”, aired a half-hour of the debate. Right after the debate the *Globe and Mail* dispatched columnist Scott Young to Port

⁸² Fisher, *Toronto Telegram*, December 2, 1961, pg. 7.

⁸³ *Toronto Star*, TV Week, March 22, 1964. I determined the date by reviewing TV listings in the *Toronto Star*. The listing for March 29 promotes the Hellyer interview.

⁸⁴ Fisher interview, March 9, 2009.

Arthur and he wrote two columns the first of which was headlined “The Fisher Legend” and the second “Fisher’s Home Range.” In these columns Young profiled “the large man who has become one of the most interesting pop-offs in Canadian politics.”⁸⁵

During the early 1960s the pressures on Fisher of being a politician became more and more apparent. His travel to and from his family in his constituency in northern Ontario took a lot of time and cost him a lot of money. During the 1962 campaign a report in the *Globe and Mail* summed up Fisher’s situation.

Mr. Fisher, who has vociferously argued for an increase in pay for parliamentarians has told his constituents that if re-elected he will not be able to live in the riding because he cannot afford the cost of maintaining two households.⁸⁶

He was also increasingly frustrated by the partisan nature of politics. The founding of the New Democratic Party had created political tension and the *Globe and Mail* described Fisher as “the enfant terrible of the New Democratic Party.”⁸⁷ Others called him a “maverick” or “gadfly”. However Fisher remained popular in Port Arthur and he won re-election in the 1962 election that returned a Conservative minority government.

In 1963, after another election and another minority government this time Liberal, Fisher was now the deputy leader of the New Democratic Party and sat on the front bench next to leader Tommy Douglas. In a letter to Douglas in the summer of 1964 the NDP MP, Harold Winch, wrote about his concerns about the decisions made in caucus. “Writing personally and confidentially, I can understand the attitude of Doug

⁸⁵ Young, Scott, *Globe and Mail*, “The Fisher Legend”, March 26, 1964 and “Fisher’s Home Range”, March 28, 1964.

⁸⁶ *Globe and Mail*, May 29, 1962, pg. 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Fisher who can only see things in the realm of immediate headlines.”⁸⁸ Fisher says his duties including four elections in eight years revealed the risks of politics. “You see, when you’ve got four kids and the particular age and god knows I went into debt a bit as an MP. It’s a risky job being an MP. It wasn’t clear I could make some money enough to keep the family going.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Stanley Knowles Fonds, “Harold Winch letter to Stanley Knowles,” July 8, 1964, MG 32 C59, Volume 101, Library and Archives Canada.

⁸⁹ Fisher interview, March 9, 2009.

The Journalist

Fisher decided not to run for office in 1965. After the election he became a member of the Ottawa Press Gallery. He had already added a second column every week but now he began writing most week days for the *Toronto Telegram*. He continued his weekly television program, now produced at *CJOH* in Ottawa. Fisher also appeared on *CTV* especially during live coverage of political events such as leadership conventions. He contracted to do radio commentaries for a station in the Lakehead and he taught at Carleton University in Ottawa.

On top of his various commitments to journalism Fisher branched out further. In 1969 John Munro, the Minister of Health and Welfare, asked Fisher to write a report on sports, "The Task Force on Sports for Canadians". One of the report's recommendations created an organization to administer amateur and international hockey called Hockey Canada. Munro named Fisher to the board. Fisher was on the board of Hockey Canada until it was disbanded in the 1990s. He chaired Hockey Canada's international committee. He was a key organizer of the 1972 Canada-Russia series and played a central role in Canada's controversial participation in international hockey in the 1970s. Fisher says his role at Hockey Canada was "to keep control of the board to the extent of the aims that we had sketched"⁹⁰ Chris Lang says Fisher designed the "aims". "Doug would have been the key, principal thinker on Hockey Canada in terms of the strategy."⁹¹ Lang also says that Fisher was "the author" of the 1972 Canada-Russia Series. It was Fisher's idea to enlist the Canadian government to

⁹⁰ Fisher interview, November 23, 2009.

⁹¹ Lang interview, May 19, 2009.

support the series. Fisher also oversaw the negotiations between the National Hockey League and the players' representative Alan Eagleson, to agree to the eight-game series.

In 1972 the Premier of Ontario, Bill Davis, established a royal commission, the "Ontario Commission on the Legislature" to review the workings of the provincial legislature. Fisher joined Dalton Camp, a Conservative strategist and *Toronto Star* columnist, and Farquhar Oliver, former leader of the provincial Liberal party, as commissioners. This work lasted four years and produced a series of reports that reformed the workings of the Legislature.

The Commission called for the introduction of ways to limit debates including closure. However closure would be limited and only possible after consultations with the opposition. It recommended that television broadcast the legislature. As a former MP Fisher knew the value of the committee system in Ottawa and the Report calls for a broadening of the influence of committees in the legislature. Fisher's life long defense of the place the legislature holds in our democracy was clear. "It is our general warning, however, that Members and their parties should show more critical concern about the standards of debate and the levels of participation in the Legislature as a whole."⁹² The Commission traveled to a number of other jurisdictions to gather research for the reports.

In 1980 Fisher worked on another Ontario task force on recreation and fitness. Throughout this period, Fisher received no salary for his work for the Ontario government or for his work on sports policy and Hockey Canada.

⁹² *Ontario Commission on the Legislature*. Toronto: Queen's Park. 1975. Committee co-chairmen Dalton Camp, Douglas Fisher and Farquhar Oliver, pg. 7.

In addition Fisher found occasional work as an arbitrator in labour disputes representing trade unions in conciliation hearings. For example, in the summer of 1972, Fisher was a member of the conciliation board in a dispute between Canada Steamship Lines and the Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks. The report stated that the Conciliation Board met over six days in August. Fisher wrote a minority report. "I dissent from the chairman particularly on his wage recommendations, because I find them inadequate and unrealistic."⁹³ Fisher represented the Canadian Union of Public Employees on a labour dispute at the Civic Hospital in Hamilton. Fisher was paid a salary for all of these labour negotiations. He says the arbitration work was well paid. "I could see the opportunity in making a quarter million...a half a million a year on retainer and I decided no I didn't want that."⁹⁴ Fisher's commitment to the labour movement did not extend to making mediation a career. He preferred journalism and stopped taking mediation cases.

In May 1975 Fisher added a new monthly column called "Between Ourselves" in the *Legion Magazine*. The column was addressed to Canada's veterans and Fisher continued writing it until his retirement in the spring of 2005. The column gave Fisher more freedom and an audience that he felt a close bond with, Canada's veterans.

His television work also increased. Fisher continued his weekly late night program on Sundays that aired on *CJOH* and other stations across Canada. Through the 1970s he was a regular panelist on *CTV's* weekly political program "Question Period". He

⁹³ *Report of Board of Conciliation established to deal with dispute between Canada Steamship Lines and Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship clerks*, August 31, 1974, HD 8039 L82 C2 A353 Library and Archives Canada.

⁹⁴ Fisher interview, November 9, 2008.

made regular appearances on *CJOH*'s supper hour newscast. In the late 1970s he hired Nancy Wilson, now an anchor on *CBC Newsworld*, as an associate producer in Ottawa for a new program called "Hourlong".

We worked on this program called Hourlong. It was a fairly ambitious co-production between CJOH in Ottawa and CFTO in Toronto. Doug was the host from Ottawa and Fraser Kelly and Isabel Bassett were the hosts in Toronto.⁹⁵

"Hourlong" began its yearlong run on Monday October 10, 1977 at 10:00 p.m. on CTV affiliates in Toronto, Kitchener, Sudbury and Ottawa.

Wilson recalls that a year later Fisher worked with Max Keeping at *CJOH* to create another weekly political program called "House on the Hill".

He pitched why don't we do a weekly slash parliamentary affairs program? Max Keeping was the host. I was one of the producers and Doug was in his element. He was basically the senior or executive producer of the show. He drove the stories. Through that he was the one pushing me on air.⁹⁶

In 1979 Fisher was approaching 60. For the next twenty-five years he continued to write his columns for the *Toronto Sun*, syndicated to other papers across the country, and the *Legion Magazine*. He gained the moniker "dean of the press gallery" for outlasting all other members of the gallery. Politicians he had known for decades, advanced into senior positions, and three, John Turner, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chretien became Prime Ministers. Fisher's column continued to reflect his respect for parliament. Graham Fraser was a reporter for the *Globe and Mail* in Ottawa during this period and says:

He was one of the only columnists who systematically watched the House and systematically read the transcripts of the committees and then come out with a kind of appraisal of who were the good MPs and

⁹⁵ Wilson, Nancy, interview with the author, April 27, 2009.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

who were not good MPs based on a really careful observation of who was doing what in the House and on the committees.⁹⁷

When Fisher arrived on the Hill in the morning he went to the parliamentary cafeteria for breakfast and an information sharing session. Wednesday is the day the party caucuses meet. Fraser recalls attending some of those breakfasts.

It wasn't by invitation or anything. You just picked up your tray and came. It was one of the ways he knew before caucus what was happening and I am sure made calls at the end of the day and said so what happened when you stood up and talked about whatever.⁹⁸

Mike Duffy betrays a tinge of envy about Fisher's access during those years.

Doug Fisher would be invited for lunch or a cup of coffee or whatever and I can only imagine what came out the other end. People had let their hair down pretty well and felt we can trust him not to betray them as the source of some of his insights.⁹⁹

Robert Fife, now CTV's Ottawa Bureau Chief was the *Toronto Sun* Bureau Chief from 1987 – 1998 working with Fisher.

He was probably the most informed journalist on Parliament Hill. He was the only person that read Hansard from cover to cover every day and paid attention to the committee work. He had an extensive network of cabinet ministers, backbench MPs and the Prime Minister who would call him and talk to him. So there really wasn't anybody on Parliament Hill who had such a wide scope of understanding of how parliament operated. He had first hand knowledge of how policy was made and in terms of politics.¹⁰⁰

Interviews with three of those prime ministers, John Turner, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chretien confirmed that Fisher had easy access to all them. John Turner remembers he "had many conversations with Fisher through the years."¹⁰¹ Fisher actively lobbied Prime Minister Mulroney on forestry issues and Mulroney invited

⁹⁷ Fraser interview, March 6, 2009.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Duffy, Mike, (telephone interview) interview with the author, March 12, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Fife, Robert, (telephone interview) interview with the author, July 20, 2009.

¹⁰¹ Turner, John, (telephone interview) interview with the author, March 25, 2009.

Fisher to Harrington Lake. “We invited him in to have dinner with us and spend an evening together. My wife and I, the children were around then, we’d all sit around on a summer evening.”¹⁰²

Fisher continued to take on various other jobs. His work at Hockey Canada continued with planning for the Canada Cup tournaments and other hockey issues. In 1980 the Ontario government named Fisher to conduct a study of the province’s sports policy. Fisher was not paid a salary to complete the \$100,000 report. “The Policy and Programs of the Ontario Government for Recreation, Sport and Fitness,” was released a year later. It dealt with a wide range of subjects from athletic scholarships to the special needs of Indians and Metis.

My fundamental conclusion concerning fitness is that Ontario will have a fitter populace if two changes are introduced in the education system. First, physical education should be made compulsory again in secondary schools to the end of grade 12. Second, and even more important, there should be some special programs to train more primary school teachers in physical education and sports leadership.¹⁰³

In Ottawa much of 1981 was taken up with the debate about the adoption of a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Fisher opposed the initiative and went to London twice to lobby for a “vote denying that the British should have the right to be the final judge of this thing.”¹⁰⁴ He said about the charter, “It’s nice if you have it but setting out to create one this late in the day of a country is nuts.”¹⁰⁵

Fisher also testified before a number of parliamentary committees. His last appearance was to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in 1999

¹⁰² Mulrone interview, March 27, 2009.

¹⁰³ *Toronto Star*, January 20, 1981, pg. B2.

¹⁰⁴ Fisher interview, March 10, 2009.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

at the age of 79. After more than 30 years as a member of the Ottawa press corps

Fisher, the participant, opened by providing this definition of his role as an observer.

I've never been a reporter or a journalist in the sense of working in a newsroom. There was a discussion just before I came here about the Parliamentary Press Gallery and the people and the competition. I can't speak to that any more than you can as outsiders who've been along the rim, so don't look to me to be an authority on reporting and journalism as it's practiced by the networks and the newspapers.¹⁰⁶

Fisher's testimony at this hearing focused on his recollections and expertise acquired as a participant. The brief of the committee looked at the issue of secrecy in committees and if and how the committee process might be opened up. Fisher told the committee about his experiences as an MP and his work on the royal commission for the Ontario government. He also told the committee he had written a report for the Canadian Bar Association that was submitted to a committee in 1982.

One of the recommendations we made in that report was that committee reports must be responded to. There must be a formal response, and absolutely, if any member of the committee wants it, they must be debated in the House.¹⁰⁷

His television work was now limited to his weekly interview program airing on *CJOH* and his regular commentaries for the *CJOH* evening news program. The program continued to give Fisher a profile in Ottawa and access to a new generation of Ottawa's political elite who were all keen to get their face, and give their opinions, on television. However, perhaps as a result of the advent of 24-hour news, the program ended in 1992.

In his last years on the Hill Fisher's column gave him an influence amongst politicians. Herb Gray says, "Doug Fisher was one of the people who the caucus read.

¹⁰⁶ Canada, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, February 18, 1999, Ottawa.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

And when they opened the paper they went to Fisher's column. It had an impact both with respect to public opinion and inside the Queensway."¹⁰⁸ For some reporters Fisher was the man to go to for the institutional memory about federal politics but for others he was more. Nancy Wilson says, "He was a mentor to so many people, myself included. For me he made a lot of things happen that were absolutely critical."¹⁰⁹ Fife says, "You had to read Doug Fisher's column, you just had to. It's funny, he wrote for the *Sun*, but he really should have been in the *Globe and Mail*. His stuff was so insightful."¹¹⁰ That influence and respect was earned by a career as a participant and observer giving him that unique perspective that no one else had.

¹⁰⁸ Gray, Herb, interview with the author, April 15, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson interview, April 27, 2009.

¹¹⁰ Fife interview, July 20, 2009.

Chapter 2

Douglas Fisher: Politician Journalist – 1957-1965

Twenty-Third Parliament

As Douglas Fisher prepared to run for Parliament in April 1957 he thought his chances of winning the seat were slim. However on June 10 the people in the riding of Port Arthur turned away from the Liberal member of parliament, C.D. Howe, and gave their support to Fisher, the high school teacher and recently signed up member of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation party (CCF). Howe's 22-year run as the riding's MP ended and the Liberal Party also lost its majority on June 10. The Progressive Conservative Party, led by John Diefenbaker, formed a minority government; the CCF elected its first members from Ontario in a general election and now had 25 members.¹¹¹

The House didn't sit until four months later but the members, old and new, got a taste of the style of the member from Port Arthur when the September edition of the *Canadian Forum* hit the newsstands. Even before being sworn in their new colleague, Douglas Fisher, contributed the lead article. "An Interesting Campaign," assessing the campaign that spring in Port Arthur. A careful read would have given the members of parliament, the press gallery and Canadians, a sense of the forthright, opinionated member Fisher would become.

First there was his honesty.

¹¹¹ Note: CCF candidate Joseph Noseworthy won a by-election in 1942 but lost in the general election in 1945.

When we began the hooting, bellicose journey through the town two concerns were bothering me. First, we were racketing more than any wedding group's triumph – a practice I had always sniffed at. Second, was I not presuming – to move without a concession. Might it not lead to unpleasantness when we met the giant?¹¹²

Then there was his frankness.

The Port Arthur newspaper is one of the Thomson chain thus insipid and cagey...Its hand was shown in the last issue before the election. There were four stories on Mr. Howe and his views, with several pictures of him, and no real mention of either of his opponents.¹¹³

His penchant for poking fun was also there to be read.

One vitriolic fellow compared me with a yapping Pomeranian snapping at the giant bulldog, Mr. Howe. Everyone with a TV set was aware of the disproportion in physical size between Mr. Howe and me. The metaphor quickly became joke material.¹¹⁴

And finally if there was any doubt, the last sentence in the article, showed a writer not afraid to give his opinion.

Perhaps I won't be accused of unfairness then, if I comment that it would be nice to face Mr. Howe again. But with the election so close behind, with the election so near ahead, we are probably over-conscious of the politician as one who wins votes.¹¹⁵

More than 50 years later Fisher explained the thinking behind the first column as an MP.

I was trying to be very down the middle and particularly determined to put, if I had something that was unusual, I wanted to be read because it might affect things. I wanted it clear. So I wrote fairly pointedly. I suppose I made one resolution. You know that first thing I had in the Canadian Forum? I just wanted to stir things up and get things going.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Fisher, Douglas, "An Interesting Campaign", *The Canadian Forum*, September 1957, pg. 1. The "giant" Fisher refers to is C.D. Howe.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* pg. 144.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Fisher interview, March 22, 2009.

This article by Fisher could only have added to his reputation as the “giant killer” who knocked off C.D. Howe. Lester Pearson was among the many Liberals surprised by Howe’s defeat. “I could hardly believe my ears when the results came in that Mr Howe had been beaten by someone I had never heard of, one Douglas Fisher.”¹¹⁷ So, like Pearson, the members of the House must have been curious to meet Fisher, a newly minted politician and writer, the participant-observer.

Fisher was new to Ottawa but his stint as a librarian at Queen’s University in the early 1950s gave him the opportunity to read and learn about how Parliament worked. It also gave him contacts in Ottawa. “Because of my library background I knew people in the building.”¹¹⁸ Fisher also sought out advice. He recalls Liberal MP Jack Pickersgill offered the rookie member some tips. “Pick(ersgill) set out to enlighten me and he said, ‘I’ll give you a fast course in the Hill.’ And he did and he warned me too. He said, ‘remember in a pinch this is war and I’ll screw you.’ And he did.”¹¹⁹ Fisher was aware that he still had a lot to learn but he also knew he had little time to make an impact before the next election.

If I was going to survive at the next election, which was going to be called pretty soon – anybody but a fool could see that – then it was very important to me to show that I was more than just an upsetter, that I was capable of something, that I had ideas.¹²⁰

We have one account of Fisher in the House when it sat on October 14. Pierre Sevigny, a Conservative MP, wrote in his memoir.

The eyes of those present at the opening ceremonies of Parliament were fixed for a moment on the seat reserved in the CCF section for

¹¹⁷ Munro, John and Alex Inglis, editors, *Mike, The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, Volume 3, 1957-1968*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975) pg 19.

¹¹⁸ Fisher interview, November 9, 2008

¹¹⁹ Fisher interview, December 9, 2008.

¹²⁰ Fisher Douglas, interview with Tom Earle.

the Member from Port Arthur. What they saw was somewhat startling. They saw a tremendous man with huge hands, large feet, and the build and gait of a well-conditioned wrestler. Those who knew the early Fisher during his first few years in the Commons can hardly forget – though they can forgive – the obnoxious performance of this Socialist nuisance, this giant-killer from Western Ontario. In order to make sure that no one failed to notice his presence, Fisher would appear in the Chamber resplendent in the loudest possible clothes, wearing a red sports shirt that would be colourful in a ski resort but was rather at odds with the usual dignity of the Commons.¹²¹

Fisher didn't waste time re-enforcing the impression Sevigny noted asking his first question on October 16, the third day of the session on an issue of concern to his constituents.

What plans has the minister for assuaging the feelings of the Port Arthur city council regarding the minister's initial decision to send only minor departmental officials to confer with the council about deep sea shipping facilities at the lakehead?¹²²

The next day Fisher was back with another question, again about matters related to his constituency.

Is there any provision in the contract to be let for the pipe line east of the lakehead under the aegis of the northern Ontario Pipeline Crown Corporation...as a means of easing the growing unemployment problem in this area?¹²³

Fisher delivered his maiden speech ten days after the Throne Speech on October 23.

He listed four things he would discuss as he began.

Firstly, the significance of the electoral result in the constituency of Port Arthur; secondly the role of the press and television in the political campaign; thirdly the problems of the constituency of Port Arthur; and fourthly some of the questions on the principles and

¹²¹ Sevigny, Pierre, *This Game of Politics*, (Toronto, McLelland & Stewart, 1965) pg. 125

¹²² Canada, House of Commons, Debates and Proceedings (Hansard), 1st Session, Vol. 1, pg. 32, October 16, 1957. Ottawa.

¹²³ Hansard, pg. 57, October 17, 1957.

ideas of Liberals and Conservatives. That is to say the parties, not the small “l” liberal or the small “c” conservative.¹²⁴

The speech was cut short when that day’s sitting came to an end and Fisher resumed it on November 11. As he opened part two Fisher addressed a topic that he would come back to time and again until he finally got what he wanted, more money for MPs.

Mr. Speaker this house has learned that the government is not interested at the present time in higher pay for members of parliament. Amongst the new members of all parties with whom I have had the opportunity to chat there was not any real concern about higher pay but there was concern about a more complete stenographic and secretarial service.¹²⁵

The speech also singled out the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (*CBC*) for special attention. Fisher called for better service in remote communities. “Television brightens, informs, and moderates life in remote places.”¹²⁶ For the rest of his parliamentary career the *CBC* was one of Fisher’s key interests.

After his retirement he described to a reporter for the *Hill Times* his fondest memory of all his years on Parliament Hill, both as a politician and journalist.

It wouldn't be as a columnist. It would be as a Member of Parliament. And that was making my maiden speech in 1957. It was memorable because tradition was that, when a person's making their first speech, nobody razzes them or causes them any trouble. That didn't happen with me for various reasons. I was greeted by a storm of roasting and jeering and I had to just deepen my voice and shout a little bit longer and louder. It was a trying, but at the same time, an amusing and happy experience.¹²⁷

The next day the speech landed Fisher on the *Toronto Star*’s front-page. It wasn’t the substance of the speech that attracted the editors. The report said “it often takes a

¹²⁴ Hansard, pg. 335, October 23, 1957.

¹²⁵ Hansard, pg. 952, November 11, 1957.

¹²⁶ Ibid, pg. 953

¹²⁷ Song, Jenny, *The Hill Times*, Aug. 6 2006, pg. 1.

rookie MP, not yet blemished by the dull gray fog of rhetoric, to come up with a few sharp phrases.” It then highlighted a few.

On MP’s: Sketchy, misinformed, and underinformed.
 On the standard of parliamentary debate: A business of “You said this.” And “No, I didn’t.” And “Yes, you did.”
 On the CBC: Rather frumpy.¹²⁸

The next day the *Star* ran another report on the speech and said Fisher:

...opened fire in the Commons in his first full-length speech lashing out with a steady aim but varying targets...It was a tour de force in which he showed how he earned his title of ‘Doug the Giant Killer,’ a nickname that emerged first from his defeat of Rt. Hon. C.D. Howe at the polls, and second because Fisher is somewhat of a giant. He stands six feet five inches and weights 255 pounds.¹²⁹

Fisher understood that he needed to make an impression on his constituents and that the way to reach them was through the media.

He added his own voice in another report in the *Canadian Forum* in December. (This time the editors of the *Forum* called the piece “Commons Comment” and they used that name in his subsequent contributions.) In this article Fisher rated the issues before Parliament and the leadership of the four parties. Throughout the piece he looked ahead to the “election to come – probably in April or early May.”¹³⁰ He dispensed with the issues quickly. “Trade, unemployment, and national unity are familiar election issues and none is clear-cut.” Then he took on the leaders. The Conservative Prime Minister “John Diefenbaker has not dominated the House so much as opposition fears of his popularity in the country would seem to warrant.” Fisher made no mention of the Social Credit leader, Robert Thompson, and chose to ignore the CCF leader, M.J. Coldwell, while praising the CCF house leader, Stanley

¹²⁸ *Toronto Star*, November 12, 1957, pg. 1.

¹²⁹ *Toronto Star*, November 13, pg. 31.

¹³⁰ Fisher, “Commons Comment”, *Canadian Forum*, December 1957, pg. 201.

Knowles, for his expertise “on procedure.” He added, “The industry and cleverness of his tactics are blunted, however, by the way the counter-weighted older parties ignore the CCF (and the Social Crediters).” Lester Pearson, the presumptive leader of the Liberal Party, got a rough ride. “On a set speech Pearson is magnificent, colleagues say he is even better around a table, but, so far, in the question and needling periods he has seemed inept.”¹³¹

The twenty-third Parliament lasted only 110 days and held only 78 sittings but Fisher registered with the three groups he felt he had to reach: his constituents, the other members of the House and the Ottawa press gallery.

Once I got to Ottawa, my whole aim was to make some kind of an impression in the House of Commons that would get back to the Lakehead to save me from the Diefenbaker override that was going to come on.¹³²

One of the consequences of Fisher’s rush to get attention in that first short Parliament was that the CCF party hierarchy did not take to the brash rookie methods of Fisher and his colleague Frank Howard from British Columbia.

Within two months you would not find two more unpopular MPs with M.J Coldwell, the leader, and Stanley Knowles (the House leader) than Frank Howard and me. This was the price of what we did...We were on our feet every day. We were pushing and we were raising hell in caucus...Because of where we came from, neither of us had ever been part of the CCF cadre.¹³³

Fisher was a full time politician in the twenty-third Parliament. His commitment to politics can be seen in everything he did and said. He focused, almost exclusively, on getting re-elected. In this short Parliament Fisher was a participant who sought to be in the public eye. The CCF caucus “couldn’t quite figure it out and they almost

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Fisher to Tom Earle, May 31, 1993, pg. 25.

¹³³ Ibid, pg. 25.

figured there was something wrong with a new MP who could come in and get so much attention on so many stories.”¹³⁴ His role as a journalist/observer was in its infancy but it would grow in the next Parliament and the tensions caused by his notoriety would spill over to other parties and the parliamentary press gallery.

¹³⁴ *Douglas Fisher, his memories of Prime Minister Pearson and the Pearson Government*, Interviewed by Peter Stursberg, June 30 1976, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, pg. 14.

Twenty-Fourth Parliament

Fisher's election date prediction in the *Canadian Forum* was out by a couple of days. The election was on March 31, 1958 and not in April or May but the result was the one Fisher predicted. In the days leading up to the election call a columnist for the Thomson chain, Pat Nicholson, suggested Fisher write a column. Fisher recalled it this way to Tom Earle in 1993. "So I wrote a column saying that the way it looked to me, Diefenbaker was going to run up 200 seats."¹³⁵ That prediction didn't win Fisher many fans in his party but he was close to the mark as the Progressive Conservatives won 208 seats, the Liberals 48 and the CCF a mere eight.

The CCF party leaders, including leader M.J. Coldwell and house leader, Stanley Knowles, were defeated. Saskatchewan CCF MP Hazen Argue was elected as the House Leader while Coldwell remained the leader of the party. The CCF establishment was dismissive of the tiny CCF parliamentary caucus. "The ragged caucus of 1958 was made up of mavericks and eccentrics...the caucus followed its own course and had almost no contact with either the national executive or with Coldwell."¹³⁶ Combined with the small Liberal opposition it guaranteed Fisher the opportunity to have a prominent voice in the new Parliament.

When the new session got under way Fisher turned his attention to the journalists, the observers, in the parliamentary press gallery. He began in the House when he

¹³⁵ Fisher interview to Earle.

¹³⁶ McLeod, Thomas and Ian McLeod, *Tommy Douglas: The road to Jerusalem*, (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1987), pg. 215

placed a question on the order paper about the “use of newspaper correspondents in the Parliamentary Press Gallery as commentators on *CBC* television programs.”¹³⁷

On July 31 the *Globe* columnist Robert Duffy took up the story.

Mr. Fisher’s four-part question, placed on the Order Paper several weeks ago, wants to know: Is Charles Lynch a *CBC* employee? If not, has he appeared on *CBC* TV since May 12? How many times? And how many other members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery have appeared and who are they?¹³⁸

Lynch was the *Southam* columnist in Ottawa. After Fisher raised the issue of the *CBC* favoring Lynch with multiple appearances the *CBC* quickly reduced his assignments. Duffy reported that Lynch “suggested that the *CBC* is so nervous about the questions in the House that he became TV poison as soon as his name was mentioned.”¹³⁹ Fisher, for his part, felt “Lynch was doing too much of the Ottawa (*CBC* TV) reporting, considering that he is only one of the 90-odd members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery.”¹⁴⁰ The kerfuffle raised a number of issues facing the gallery. At the time radio and TV reporters were not allowed to be members of the gallery. It also spoke to who among the print reporters was best able to communicate on television.

However Fisher didn’t stop with his questions in the House. In the August 1958 edition of the *Canadian Forum* he devoted his column to the parliamentary press gallery. Here, for the first time, there was a clear intersect between the participant as politician and the observer as journalist.

¹³⁷ *Globe and Mail*, June 20, 1958, pg. 1.

¹³⁸ *Globe and Mail*, July 31, 1958, pg. 7.

¹³⁹ *ibid*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*.

In his 1962 thesis, “Inquiry into the position and working of the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa”, Colin Seymour-Ure quoted a speech Fisher made to the Institute of Public Opinion in Yorkton, Saskatchewan on August 6, 1958. “The adjective ‘mediocre’ is the most apt one for the Canadian daily press in general, and that in covering federal affairs the adjective ‘incomplete’ must be added.”¹⁴¹ Based on the speech quotes Seymour-Ure used it seems certain that Fisher used his research and took what he had learned about the gallery as a politician to draw conclusions for both the article and his speech.

He began the column by pointing out the “remarkable sameness” in the reporting. That is a common refrain about the gallery today as is his observation that “after question period each day, the Gallery empties except for the CP regular,” of course today Canadian Press is usually also absent. He saved his toughest comments for the end.

One cannot use adjectives such as vigilant, crusading, inspiring, or muck-raking about them...Mediocre is the best descriptive word. Since the press loves to apply that to most of the members of parliament that is the best place to leave it.¹⁴²

While Fisher was still more than three years from becoming a newspaper columnist he made his opinions on the state of political writing very clear. He understood that he was about to skewer the very people who would be writing about him. “It is bootless (sic) to generalize about these writers of type or quality. It is probably indiscreet to even comment about them.”¹⁴³ He lamented the lack of analysis in the political coverage. “It reflects our dearth of weekly or fortnightly reviews and paucity

¹⁴¹ Seymour-Ure, Colin, pg. 157. For example the word “gobbets” is used in both the speech and the column. See page 170 of the thesis and page 101 of the column.

¹⁴² Ibid. pg. 102.

¹⁴³ Fisher, “Commons Comment,” *The Canadian Forum*, August 1958, pg. 101.

of substantial columns written by journalists who are above the daily ‘colour’ gobbets.”¹⁴⁴ Fisher pointed out that only four newspapers had assigned columnists writing daily political columns; the *Globe*, the *Telegram* in Toronto, the *Montreal Gazette*. The *Thomson* chain had one columnist used by its papers.¹⁴⁵

Fisher’s arrival in Ottawa came just as the Ottawa political column was making its first, tentative appearances on the editorial-opinion pages of Canadian newspapers. In the column he noted the Canadian tradition where the “men in the Gallery were brokers, in a sense, for their parties, and most newspapers were very partisan.” In this column Fisher touched on the perception in Ottawa that senior journalists at the time had what he termed a “Liberal bias.” Patrick Brennan in “Reporting the Nation’s Business” wrote, “(Blair) Fraser, (Bruce) Hutchison, (George) Ferguson, and (Grant) Dexter, along with several associate members, were firmly identified as members of a Liberal press establishment.”¹⁴⁶ During this period Fraser at *Maclean’s* and Hutchison at the *Financial Post* wrote weekly columns on national affairs. Grant Dexter had been editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* from 1948 – 1954 before returning to Ottawa as a reporter. George Ferguson was the editor of the *Montreal Star*.

Fisher named Grant Dexter and Blair Fraser as Liberals, saying of Dexter, “the emergence of his Liberal bias is so inevitable that he seems an astute party spokesman, rather than an observer.” It was the daily newspaper columnists that Fisher rated; Charles Lynch of *Southam* who has an “unoppressive bias”, Arthur

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* pg. 101.

¹⁴⁵ Note: The Charles Lynch column was used in *Southam* papers and Pat Nicholson wrote for *Thomson*. So the Fisher list is incomplete but all these columns were new to Canadian dailies.

¹⁴⁶ Brennan, Patrick, *Reporting the Nation’s Business*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994) pg. 179.

Blakely, the *Gazette* columnist who has “good sources within the government” and the *Telegram*’s Judith Robinson, whose “astringency is so rare it is precious.”¹⁴⁷

Criticizing the media has long been a sport for Canadian politicians but it was not common for a member of parliament, barely a year into the job, to take to the floor of the House of Commons and the pages of a magazine to work over the positives and negatives of the Ottawa press gallery.

The print media was important but the influence of television and radio grew quickly. Only the *CBC* was accountable to parliament and broadcasters were subject to licensing by a government agency. Fisher had established his interest in the *CBC* in his maiden speech in 1957. Also, as noted earlier, Fisher realized the *CBC* was important to his constituents and his comments about the broadcaster usually resulted in national media coverage for him.

In the 1958 Parliament Fisher became one of the CCF members of the Special Committee on Broadcasting. The Committee met over 30 times and gathered more than 700 pages of evidence about the *CBC*.¹⁴⁸ Before looking at the issues debated in the committee it is useful to jump ahead a few weeks to a debate on the committee’s report in the House of Commons on July 18, 1959. Fisher made a long speech about the *CBC* that illustrated the passion he held for the *CBC* and the contempt he held for private media interests. Fisher opened by stating, “

The idea of a nation is a fragile one.” Then he went on.

This is the vital and binding function of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, to translate the abstract conception of nationhood into something that can be seen, heard, felt and understood. No

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Canada, House of Commons, Debates and Proceedings (Hansard), House of Commons, 24th Parliament, Volume 5, pg. 6307, July 18, 1959. Ottawa

organization has done more to achieve this high purpose. An idea like distinctive nationality is not worth 5 cents on the dollar in the market place. You place the CBC at the mercy of the hucksters of deodorant and detergent peddlers, and you wave goodbye to it as a buttress to national unity.¹⁴⁹

Fisher then turned his attention to the private media taking on the Thomson chain of newspapers. “There are 24 outlets in Canada that week after week pour out a daily dose of poison against the *CBC*.” He didn’t spare two other media families of the time, the Siftons and Bell.

Those of us who follow what the Siftons and Mr. Bell are doing could become very worried about the situation in Regina or the situation in Winnipeg, where we may be moving toward a private monopoly in newspapers, radio and television...much of the criticism of the *CBC* in the newspaper medium is of the orientation of the Thomson and Sifton interests.¹⁵⁰

Here Fisher addressed the issue of media concentration that would be the subject of two federal reviews of the media, one in 1969 and the other in the early 1980s.

Fisher also understood the budget issues facing the *CBC*. Could it provide the services of a public broadcaster while relying on advertising for part of its budget?

It is not the *CBC*’s function to turn a profit. Where this can be done without impairing the *CBC*’s prime function as a national service without diminishing the standard of programming there can be no objection, but it is not the end goal of the *CBC* to turn a profit. This is precisely the weakness in the proposition that the *CBC* should cede production rights in the sponsored shows.¹⁵¹

It is now time to wind back and look at the hearings the Special Committee on Broadcasting held in 1958. Fisher asked specific questions about when the *CBC* would reach more Canadians especially in remote areas. He raised a number of issues about the *CBC*’s work in Ottawa and asked *CBC* management about the use of print

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, pg. 6308

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, pg. 6310

¹⁵¹ *ibid*, pg. 6309

reporters on *CBC*. As shown earlier Fisher felt that this work was being given to a select handful of the reporters. He insisted this was favouritism by the *CBC* and recommended the *CBC* assign its own reporters to Ottawa.

As the Committee did its work the *CBC* decided to kill a program called “Preview Commentary”, a daily radio program on national affairs that used reporters from the Ottawa press gallery to deliver three or four-minute pre-recorded commentaries on federal politics. Three producers connected with the program resigned alleging that political interference had forced the *CBC* to cancel the program. The Committee held a series of meetings on the issue. On July 2 Fisher asked the Minister responsible for the *CBC*, George Nowlan, about the threat to fire people in connection with the program.

Mr. Fisher: Could you give us an explanation as to why Mr. Bushnell (acting President of *CBC*) used the expression in connection with the withdrawal of Preview Commentary that “heads will roll”?

Mr. Nowlan: I cannot give any explanation whatsoever of that¹⁵²

The next day the *Globe and Mail* reported on the front-page that Fisher raised questions of government interference.

Revenue Minister Nowlan freely admitted today that he has passed on to the management of the *CBC* criticisms of its TV and radio programs which he had heard from MPs and others... In two hours of furious argument, the Conservatives on the committee refused to a *CBC* director and an official to tell what they knew of the alleged threats that if the program remained, Mr. Bushnell and Alphonse Ouimet, *CBC* President, would be fired.¹⁴²

¹⁵² Canada, House of Commons, Special Broadcasting Committee on Broadcasting, Minutes of Proceedings and evidence, No. 17, July 2, 1959, pg. 603, Library of Parliament, Ottawa.

¹⁴² *Globe and Mail*, July 3, 1959, pg. 1.

In 1959 Fisher wrote three “Commons Comment” columns for the *Canadian Forum*. The third, for the August issue, demonstrated that Fisher was keen to use his access as a columnist to put his spin on what had happened in the Broadcasting Committee.¹⁵³ In that July speech in the House about the *CBC* Fisher complained about how the Committee’s report was written.

How much time did the committee have to prepare the report? Over the weekend. The draft report was prepared on Monday. A whole mélange of ideas was chopped and meshed together, given a certain amount of balance, and then put to the full committee in camera the next day. The Committee spent somewhere between 2 1/2 and 3 1/2 hours sifting that particular mélange of ideas into a rather stupid report which was presented to this house.¹⁵⁴

In the *Canadian Forum* Fisher said.

The committee produced a 1500 word report. This document was the fruit of some three hours of deliberation over a larger draft report put together by four or five of the more active members over a weekend.¹⁵⁵

The central issue was about where the political pressure came from to take “Preview Commentary” off the air. Fisher took the reader into parliament’s inner sanctum. It was the day one of the *CBC* producers who resigned was testifying. Fisher explained that he went into the Conservative lobby to look for a colleague. It goes to the heart of Fisher as a participant-observer.

As I broke through the door of the government lobby calling his name, I almost fell over an animated group composed of the Prime Minister, Mr. Halpenny, the (Broadcast) Committee chairman, and Richard Bell, M.P. for Carleton and the most experienced Conservative on the Committee. I bumbled abruptly from the sanctum, with a feeling of guilt. My subsequent analysis of this personal reaction relates it to my

¹⁵³ Note: The first (February 1959) is similar to the November 1957 column that rates Parliament and the second (March 1959) focuses on the quality of debate in the House using the cancellation of the *Avrow Arrow* as the example.

¹⁵⁴ Hansard, Volume 5, pg. 6308.

¹⁵⁵ Fisher, “Commons Comment,” *Canadian Forum*, August 1959, pg. 97.

rather unconscious acceptance of the view that the Prime Minister was the mysterious influence. There has not been any substantiation of this and several Conservatives who were close to the controversy have assured me that the PM had kept only an amused, detached eye on the committee proceedings. The PM's known intensity and sensitivity on the appraisal given to him and the government by the press and broadcasters has made his political enemies suspicious. On many occasions he told reporters who had been on Preview Committee what he thought of their remarks, if he encountered them later in the morning.¹⁵⁶

In the Committee hearings Fisher probed *CBC* executives and the government about political interference leading to the cancellation of "Preview Commentary" but in using the anecdote from the lobby he reported a meeting that no journalist had access to. It demonstrated that Fisher felt at ease combining the roles of politician and journalist.

"Preview Commentary" was quickly re-instated but the "affair left a bad taste in the mouths of Ottawa journalists, making them ever more vigilant in their investigations of the Diefenbaker government."¹⁵⁷ Fisher's tough questioning of all the witnesses did not convince the committee that there had been political interference. So, while the Committee report did not find any evidence of political interference, Fisher refused to go along with the findings of the majority of the Committee and told the House.

Why? Why did they find no evidence? Because Mr. Bushnell denied the purport of what a number of people close to him said he said. Why? Because the Minister of National Revenue felt that he had no accurate recollection of any remarks he may have made about the program, "Preview Commentary."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, pg. 97.

¹⁵⁷ Levine, Allan, *Scrum Wars: Prime Ministers and the Media*. (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1993) pg. 223.

¹⁵⁸ Hansard, Volume 5, pg. 6308.

Fisher's caucus might only be a handful of MPs but he discovered he could use the committee system to raise issues and make an impact. Moreover he could parlay his activities in parliament into headlines in newspapers and add his take in the *Canadian Forum*.

Fisher, the participant-observer in Parliament, had set the tone of his work by the end of 1959. Robert Duffy, then the *Globe and Mail* Ottawa columnist, wrote that Fisher "has one of the more lucid and less convoluted Parliamentary minds."¹⁵⁹ An editorial in the *Toronto Star* early in 1960 titled "Lo, Two Mavericks in the Commons" also acknowledged Fisher's contribution.

The M.P. who speaks out his mind honestly when he is in disagreement with his party is much more likely to make a good representative of his riding than a party conformist...Names like those of David Croll and Douglas Fisher are recalled long after even cabinet ministers are forgotten.¹⁶⁰

Fisher continued to challenge the leaders of the CCF. Here too Fisher was a key participant and an observer as the party debated the pros and cons of morphing the CCF into a new party, the New Democratic Party (NDP) of Canada. Fisher had joined the CCF just before he decided to seek the party's nomination in Port Arthur. Now as one of the few elected members of the party he balked at efforts to create a new party that was supposed to have a wider appeal to Canadians.

At a meeting in Hamilton of the Ontario wing of the CCF in the fall of 1959, Fisher said the "CCF tactics were 'stupid' and its strategy 'bad.'" The *Globe and Mail* went on to report:

¹⁵⁹ Duffy, Robert, *Globe and Mail*, October 13, 1959. pg. 7

¹⁶⁰ *Toronto Star*, Editorial, January 30, 1960, pg. 7.

Mr. Fisher, who has a reputation for blunt talk in the Commons, momentarily stunned the delegates with a three-minute capsule of criticism about the proposed alignment of the CCF with organized labor, farmers, professional people and others.¹⁶¹

The provincial CCF President, Carroll Colburn accused Fisher of “irresponsible conduct.”¹⁶²

The Hamilton meeting was one of many that led to a party conference in Regina and more headlines in the summer of 1960. This important meeting illustrated how Fisher, a relatively new member of the CCF, stage-managed the important question of the leadership of the party and then reported his take in the *Canadian Forum*, one of Canada’s leading left-wing journals of the time.

The CCF met in Regina in August to get a mandate from its membership to set the conditions for a meeting a year later to create a new party. One of the key questions before the convention was whether there should be a national leader in this interim period. David Lewis, a longtime party leader behind the scenes, was the national party president. Lewis wanted to keep the leadership position vacant until the founding convention of the new party. Lewis, and the party executive, courted the Saskatchewan Premier, Tommy Douglas, to be the new leader. However Douglas had just been re-elected Premier of Saskatchewan and so he couldn’t show interest in the position. Lewis also believed that if the party elected a leader now it would give that person an advantage at the next convention. “The Lewis clique’s attempt to keep the

¹⁶¹ *Globe and Mail*, October 13, 1959, pg. 1 & 2.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

leadership open for Douglas seemed inexplicable.”¹⁶³ The CCF leader in the House of Commons was Hazen Argue.

In Regina, Argue initially accepted the party’s idea to keep the formal party leadership position vacant. That only lasted until Fisher flew in from Ottawa.

Fisher arrived in Regina and began to bully Argue into changing his mind. Fisher placed a call to Ottawa and watched as Argue spoke with caucus members Frank Howard and Arnold Peters. They told him not to show his face on Parliament Hill again unless he followed Fisher’s orders: he should read to the convention the speech which Fisher had prepared for him. Then, as Peters told it afterwards, Argue arranged a meeting with the executive; while Fisher ‘held him up by the friggin’ coat.’ Argue announced he would reject the official strategy and stand for the leadership.¹⁶⁴

The next day Fisher, as the chairman of the CCF caucus, sent a letter to Lewis and the party executive including Carl Hamilton, the party’s national secretary. The implied threat was that the leadership would be barred from caucus meetings if Hamilton openly backed a leadership position.

It has been customary for Mr. Hamilton to be privy to our caucus meetings; and unless we receive an explanation and an assurance that such partisanship is not and will not be in the nature of the national secretary’s duties, there is every likelihood that a decision will be made against such invitations.¹⁶⁵

A late night meeting on August 9 led to a hotel corridor shouting match between Fisher and Stanley Knowles the former house leader of the CCF and now a vice-president of the party. The next day the *Toronto Star* headlined its page-one report:

“CCF Brass in open war over party leadership.” The story went on:

The two top figures of the CCF party stood toe-to-toe and traded insults near midnight last night in the corridor of the Saskatchewan

¹⁶³ McLeod, *Tommy Douglas: The Road to Jerusalem*, pg. 216

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ CCF/NDP File, Fisher letter to Lewis et al, August 11 1960, MG28 IV 1, Volume 428 File 3. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

hotel here, as the party's national convention drifted into deeper conflict over the question of leadership. "You and David Lewis (CCF national president) are just a pair of bureaucratic manipulators" said Mr. Fisher his face red with anger...Mr. Fisher retorted that the "manipulations" of Mr. Knowles and Mr. Lewis over the CCF leadership, were "fixing everything up nicely for the Liberals." "For two years now you and David Lewis have been playing a pretty mean game." Mr. Fisher charged. "Not as mean as that one you've been playing." Said Mr. Knowles. "You've been behaving very foolishly."¹⁶⁶

When it came time to vote, Argue stood alone for the leadership and the party membership elected him. It was a win for Fisher. Thomas McLeod wrote, "One informed observer suggested that 'Hazen was a device, a tool for some people to express their problems...I never had any sense that Hazen was being supported for his intrinsic capabilities.'"¹⁶⁷ It seems likely Fisher must be included in the group of "some people."

The week after the Regina meeting Lewis sent Fisher a letter.

While the National Council is exceedingly anxious to have the fullest liaison and co-operation with the Caucus and to provide every assistance to members of the Caucus through the National Secretary and the National Office and staff, it reserves the right itself to select those National Officers that the Constitution requires the council, and the Council alone, to do.

May I add my own hope to that which will be expressed to you through the National Leader, that the relationship between the Caucus and the National Officers and National Council will in the future be as constructive as it has been throughout CCF history.¹⁶⁸

Fisher's next step didn't fulfill Lewis' hope. He wrote a column, "The Last CCF Roundup", for the *Canadian Forum*. The column was, firstly, an open attack on

¹⁶⁶ *Toronto Star*, August 10, 1960, pg. 1.

¹⁶⁷ McLeod, pg. 217. A footnote attributes the statement to Terry Grier who went on to be the NDP's Party Secretary.

¹⁶⁸ CCF/NDP File, Lewis letter to Fisher, August 19, 1960, MG28 IV 1 Volume 28, File 3, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

“David Lewis and his henchman, Stanley Knowles.”¹⁶⁹ Fisher held little back writing that Lewis “has been able to sway the CCF according to his views.” He went on to attack the “prosperous Toronto labor lawyer” calling Lewis the “party master-mind.” Fisher pointed out that Lewis had failed in every attempt to win a seat in the House of Commons and then raised Lewis’ religion.

“Two seats in the Toronto area, York South and York Centre have large Jewish populations which could swing behind Lewis, if he fought a vigorous campaign.” He took a stab at why Lewis was so successful in the party. “The probable secret of Lewis’ success with the CCF is the relative precision of his rather harsh, class-conscious, newspaper-baiting socialism compared with the fuzziness of most Canadian socialists.”¹⁷⁰

Fisher then gave readers his take on the leadership question at the Regina meeting.

There were two main arguments against choosing a national leader for the CCF now, according to proponents of the CCF’s national council’s compromise. It might inhibit Douglas from responding to a draft, especially if a Saskatchewan man like Argue was elevated. The other view was that it would be a form of impertinence to the labor unions coming to the founding convention. These would arrive without a political leader and the existence of a CCF leader might embarrass or anger them. Some suspicious minds, including mine, felt that the real reason for blocking Argue was to keep him from gaining any marked advantage over contenders other than Premier Douglas, contenders such as Mr. Lewis or Mr. Knowles.¹⁷¹

Now Fisher defended the leadership qualifications of Argue, and repeated in print what everybody in the CCF knew, the “bitterness” of the CCF caucus who had “only nominal influence with the CCF hierarchy.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Fisher, “The Last CCF Roundup”, *Canadian Forum*, September 1960, pg. 122.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² *ibid.* pg. 123

Yet, despite the attack on Lewis, Fisher concluded Lewis had won the biggest issue before the convention, a new party. He acknowledged it had “approved Mr. Lewis’ most daring project” with “few voiced misgivings to end the CCF by throwing it into alignment with labor.”¹⁷³ However Fisher clearly managed the leadership question at the Regina convention and was a force in making sure that Lewis did not get his way.¹⁷⁴ Once again his participation was material for his journalism.

There is an interesting footnote to this episode. The *Canadian Forum* published “A reply to Mr. Fisher” in the November edition. The “Reply” is a defense of David Lewis and an attack on Fisher. Like Fisher in his column, Lorne Ingle didn’t pull his punches.

Most of Mr. Fisher’s article has nothing at all to do with the convention. It’s clear that it was written, not to explain the convention, but to use this as an excuse to attack David Lewis. In fact, we haven’t seen such a frontal attack on David Lewis since B.A. Trestrail launched his abusive, anti-semitic diatribe in 1944.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ *ibid.* pg. 122

¹⁷⁴ Note: A year later Fisher managed Argue’s losing bid to win the leadership of the NDP.

¹⁷⁵ Ingle, Lorne, “A Reply to Mr. Fisher”, *The Canadian Forum*, November 1960, pg. 184.

The Politician Columnist

On December 2, 1961 Douglas Fisher wrote his first column for the *Toronto Telegram*. Given his comments in the House of Commons a year and half earlier, it could be considered strange that John Bassett, the owner of the *Telegram* agreed to take Fisher on at all. A debate on who should get a license for a new private television station in Toronto led Fisher to take on one of the applicants, the same John Bassett. The *Telegram* reported Fisher's outburst in the House.

“I think it is generally agreed by people who follow newspapers that you have to go a long way and search extensively to find a metropolitan daily as bad in almost every way as the Toronto Telegram,” he said. “If the standards of the Toronto Telegram are going to be transferred to the television station, all I can say is God help the Toronto listeners and watchers”.¹⁷⁶

At the end of the report it quoted Bassett's reaction.

I have no way of knowing the motives of these two gentlemen. I am not in the slightest annoyed by their comments. Their attacks on this subject are always well reported in the opposition paper in Toronto and as this paper will not accept any advertising for the Telegram, Mssrs. Fisher and Pickersgill are doing me a favor by acting as my personal public relations counsel.¹⁷⁷

Fisher's comments about the *Telegram* don't seem to have influenced Bassett. Fisher talked with the *Star*, the *Globe* and the *Telegram* about writing a column but Bassett responded to the idea first and with the most enthusiasm. “What made the Bassett thing easy was he was open that he would never cut anything. ‘Unless it is so

¹⁷⁶ *Toronto Telegram*, June 22, 1960, pg. 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 2. Note: The *Toronto Star* gave the story page-one play and used the Fisher quotes. June 22, 1960, pg. 1.

rank that we just won't run it.' But it never came to that." Fisher recalls that the *Telegram* "gave me lots of latitude."¹⁷⁸

What *Telegram* readers got was a weekly take on politics by, as the editors described him, "the most independent voice in Canadian politics." Under the byline "Douglas Fisher, MP" Fisher opened with a column rating the possible successors to Prime Minister Diefenbaker. In paragraph seven Fisher, the participant, let the reader in on what MPs muse about amongst themselves.

In the cozy cockpit of the Commons, all of us know that a serious illness could suddenly create the need for a new Prime Minister. This may seem ghoulish, even macabre; but it is reality, a cloaked reality. For this reason, there is always a lively interest in the heirs apparent.¹⁷⁹

The column then goes on to rate Fisher's five choices if the need arose. Howard Green was his first choice because he is "the best-loved and most respected of the ministers" and he would be less of a threat because he "is on the edge of elderliness" while George Hees "is well liked" but his "simplicity has been mocked openly by his opponents."¹⁸⁰

A week later Fisher took the reader into his own mindset as a politician who campaigned against the Diefenbaker sweep in 1958.

The memory of that sweeping tide lingers with all of us who faced it. It was irrational in its surge. Ever since I have geared my political sensitivity to measuring the flow – and the ebb – of the Diefenbaker tide.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Fisher interview, December 6, 2008.

¹⁷⁹ *Toronto Telegram*, December 2, 1961, pg. 7.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* pg. 7.

¹⁸¹ *Toronto Telegram*, December 9, 1961, pg. 7.

Fisher went on to review Diefenbaker's popularity and ended with his conclusion that Canadians "may re-elect a Conservative government; you cannot re-elect a Diefenbaker government."¹⁸²

Week three there was an addition to Fisher's byline. His party affiliation was added and now he was "CCF MP for Port Arthur." The column rated the leader of the opposition, Lester Pearson. There was no "participant" role in the column and Fisher presented a straightforward analysis of Pearson's strengths and weaknesses making the point that Pearson did not have the "qualities and abilities" of a strong leader of the opposition. He ended with a question: "How could the Liberals gain 85 seats at the next election when led by the antithesis of what is usually expected in a politician?"¹⁸³

The editors of the *Telegram* dropped the party affiliation in week four and this time the column is "Special to the Telegram." Fisher paid tribute to the *Telegram* columnist Judith Robinson who passed away the previous week. Robinson had quietly supported Fisher in his run against C.D. Howe. Fisher recalled her visit to the riding during the campaign.

She came sniffing into Port Arthur in the spring of '57...this unusual journalist a Disraelian Tory in Canada. Her first stop at the Conservative committee room had disappointed. The highest aim seemed to be second place to Howe. So she came to see me, the CCF candidate. "Could we win?" We could! Wonderful!"¹⁸⁴

Fisher went on to declare, "we became friends, and my view of her worth is very biased."

¹⁸² *ibid*

¹⁸³ *ibid*

¹⁸⁴ *Toronto Telegram*, December 23, 1961, pg. 7.

Three of the first four columns clearly reflected the participant as the observer of political events. In each Fisher took the reader where no member of the press gallery could; into the lobby for leadership gossip, the MP worried about Diefenbaker's political coattails, and his recollection of the journalist who supported his first campaign.¹⁸⁵ The uniqueness of what Fisher was doing was illustrated by the lack of consistency by the editors in introducing Fisher. In all four he was an MP but in one he was a CCF MP. In the next weeks the name of the column varied as well: "Ottawa Scene" one week and "Ottawa Outlook" the next.¹⁸⁶ Most weeks the Fisher column is the only Canadian journalism on page seven, the *Telegram's* opinion page. Far-flung datelines from CBC far-east correspondent Michael Maclear and *Telegram* correspondent Peter Worthington took their place on the page and there was a regular column by Cardinal MacGuigan. Other Canadian political opinions were not used.

When the 1962 election was called the *Telegram* dropped Fisher's column for the duration of the campaign. He was welcomed back the first Saturday after the election, June 23. "DOUGLAS FISHER, returned as New Democratic MP for Port Arthur, now returns to page seven with his view of politics."¹⁸⁷ The column leaned heavily on Fisher's experiences during the campaign. He reported that the question of leadership had been important to voters. "The results confirm a disturbing theme I met throughout the campaign, as a politician meeting people singly or in a group. There was little enthusiasm for our party leaders."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Note: Fisher called Robinson the night of his win in 1957 and the *Telegram* was the only Toronto paper with a quote from Fisher the next day.

¹⁸⁶ *Toronto Telegram*, April 7, 1962 and April 14, 1962

¹⁸⁷ *Toronto Telegram*, June 23, 1962, pg. 7.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid*

I will not examine each and every column in Fisher's career as a politician – journalist. Instead I will focus on a few that illustrate how Fisher used the column and how he handled the fine line he tread as a politician writing a column. Was he a politician first or a journalist?

On October 22, 1962 one story dominated headlines around the world. President Kennedy announced a blockade of Cuba after Russia deployed missiles in Cuba. The Cuban missile crisis, as it came to be known, forced politicians in Canada to take positions. Fisher, as a MP, usually spoke on domestic affairs, and for his column on the crisis he focused on the debate in Parliament. He opened with a reference to a speech by an Alberta Conservative MP, Terry Nugent, critical of the U.S. position. Fisher provided no quotes from Nugent but used his name and affiliation with the government to tie one Conservative to anti-U.S. criticism.¹⁸⁹ Fisher turned to the NDP position and how the party communicated it. He reported that the initial NDP reaction had been one of caution because “it was not the time for an off-the-cuff appraisal, critical or otherwise.” The next day “wires were coming in from individuals and party groups across the country demanding a forthright stand that was critical of the American move.” Fisher noted that the NDP's Tommy Douglas, elected in a by-election the day the crisis began, “zeroed in with a blunt comment on the illegality of the American move.”

What about opinion amongst other members of the House? Fisher told his readers, “I cannot publicize the private words of members in chats behind the curtain or in the lobbies.” Then with that caveat left hanging he hedged the sources of his opinion

¹⁸⁹ Canada. House of Commons, *Debates and Proceedings (Hansard)*, 23rd Parliament, 1st Session, Vol. 1, pg. 853, October 23, 1962, Ottawa. Nugent told the House that the U.S. firing on a Russian ship would “constitute an act of war, would constitute unprovoked aggression.”

gathering. “It is my opinion after many conversations that there is a much larger support for – or at least a tendency to see some merit – in the Nugent criticism of the U.S.” A careful reader might have concluded some of the sources did indeed come from the “lobbies” of the House of Commons. He went on to put the NDP position while admitting it might not be popular justifying his own support this way.

Many of you would bridle at any presumption of mine in suggesting this party view is the correct or only one of worth. But like my colleagues, I do feel it is a direct consequence of our consistent stand on nuclear weapons, on the United Nations, and on unilateral action by any of the major powers.¹⁹⁰

In the House Fisher stayed seated for much of the time during this week of international crisis. He limited himself to one question about Canada’s civil defense preparedness “at this particular critical moment.”¹⁹¹ This column illustrated how Fisher spun his observations of the debate taking a minor Conservative backbencher’s speech, using it to his advantage by turning it into his lead. He followed that by suggesting that the confidential MP’s views “behind the curtain” in the House might actually be supportive of a more anti-American position. The politician/participant clearly struggled with the journalist/observer. In this case the NDP politician put his party’s case to the reader.

¹⁹⁰ *Toronto Telegram*, October 27, 1962. Note: The second *Telegram* editorial, “The Misguided Ones” that day attacked the NDP position. “There is a fundamental difference between the NDP and the rest of Canada in the area of foreign affairs.” October 27, pg. 6.

¹⁹¹ Hansard, pg. 884, October 24, 1962.

The Twenty-fifth Parliament

On April 8, 1963 the Liberal party won the election and formed a minority government. As the NDP deputy leader Fisher had more responsibility for party matters in the House. However this did not limit his journalism. In April Fisher started writing two columns a week for the *Telegram* usually on Tuesdays and Saturdays. It was in this parliament that the *Hansard Index* for the first time had an entry in Fisher's index detailing "references to Mr. Fisher" and listed eight.¹⁹² Four of the references were in regard to his journalism, one to a speech made in Toronto, and three related to other parliamentary statements made by Fisher. The first regarding journalism was on May 12, 1964 when Heber Smith (Conservative, Simcoe North) referred to Fisher's television program. "A couple of Sundays ago I was watching television and I saw the minister being interviewed by the Liberal party's favourite part time commentator, Mr. Fisher."¹⁹³ Over the next year and a half, until he left parliament, Fisher's profile increased leading to more criticism, some of it quite personal, in the House of Commons and in the media.

Two news events in this parliament illustrate how Fisher grew more vocal as a journalist while capturing headlines with actions both inside and outside the House of Commons. The first occurred in 1963 when Fisher charged that the Finance Minister, Walter Gordon, used Bay Street help to write his first budget. The second was a televised debate in Montreal in 1964 between Fisher and then provincial Liberal Minister of Natural Resources, Rene Levesque.

¹⁹² Canada, House of Commons, Debates, Index, 26th Parliament, 2nd Session, pg. 186. Ottawa.

¹⁹³ Canada, House of Commons, Proceedings and Debates (Hansard) 26th Parliament, 2nd Session, Vol. 3, pg. 3171, May 12, 1964, Ottawa.

Gordon tabled his budget on June 13 and the next day Fisher was on his feet in Question Period.

Mr. Speaker, I should like to ask the Minister of Finance a question regarding the preparation and provenance of last night's budget speech. Can the minister assure us that he and his government officials alone prepared the budget speech without the assistance of outside consultants or ghost writers from Toronto?¹⁹⁴

In the days leading up to the budget Fisher spotted an acquaintance from Toronto in the parliamentary dining room with a finance department official. "These guys were having lunch with him, chatting intimately. The budget was due, I think the next day. They just had to have something to do with the budget."¹⁹⁵ Fisher made a few calls to officials in the department of finance and confirmed that Gordon had used three financial experts from Toronto to work on the budget.

I knew I had something that could be a real squall, cause a squall. You see, I'd been in the House long enough to know what gets press attention and what doesn't. I had become very good at what you might call that kind of managing. But I also knew that in order, given the timing of everything, in order to get the thing picked up and moving, it had to broaden out that very day.¹⁹⁶

Fisher had it right. That afternoon the *Star* and the *Telegram* played the story about the consultants on page one and the next day the *Globe and Mail* did too. Fisher himself stayed away from the controversy in his Saturday column. Instead he wrote Gordon "revealed what I have guessed before: he is a Liberal politician first, second and always."¹⁹⁷ He assessed the budget for its "political significance" and wrote, "Mr. Gordon will be an orthodox bulwark against any of his colleagues who want to

¹⁹⁴ Canada, House of Commons, *Proceedings and Debates (Hansard)*, 26th Parliament, 1st Session, Vol. 2, pg. 1169, June 14, 1963, Ottawa.

¹⁹⁵ Fisher, interview with Peter Stursberg, page 35.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Fisher, *Toronto Telegram*, June 15, 1963, pg. 7.

go free-spending.”¹⁹⁸ The Tuesday column reviewed the week in parliament and Liberal cabinet Minister, Mitchell Sharp’s performance and included a reference to the Gordon controversy.

Mr. Sharp gave evidence that he will be the most competent, invulnerable cabinet minister of the lot. He is informed, deft, persuasive and cautious. Off this one speech, we can assume that Mr. Sharp may become the No. 2 man to Pearson, a rating from which Walter Gordon dropped badly through his awkwardness during the ghost-writer episode.¹⁹⁹

Fisher didn’t refer to his role in that column but he took care of that the following Saturday. Under the banner headline “THIS IS WHY I GUNNED FOR GORDON” Fisher wrote.

I put the question on the post-budget morning which started the furor. Credit has been given me for picking up the news of strangers in the sanctum from a *Financial Post* story last month. I had read this piece and forgotten it.²⁰⁰

Having dispensed with the *Post* piece Fisher revealed to readers how he gathered the story.²⁰¹

For more than a week I had noticed that Mr. Gordon’s executive assistant was squiring two or three strangers around the Hill, like an aide-de-camp around royalty...On Budget evening the three strangers were still around...I could hardly wait to ask Mr. Gordon the question next morning. I did. His reply was awkward, hesitant, indirect, even evasive – and away rolled the drums.²⁰²

Was the parliamentarian participant mending his observer fences when, towards the end of the column, he wrote, “I would defend Mr. Gordon’s personal integrity to the

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Fisher, *Toronto Telegram*, June 19, 1963, pg. 7.

²⁰⁰ Fisher, *Toronto Telegram*, June 23, 1963, pg. 7.

²⁰¹ Note: The *Financial Post* did publish a piece about the advisors on May 13, 1963.

²⁰² *ibid.*

death. But his judgment was bad, bad, bad.”²⁰³ Fisher “managed” the Gordon story like a playwright-actor. He found the story line, delivered the lines with perfect timing and flare and, as the scene drew to its end, provided the soliloquy.

The next year Fisher again traded on his status as a politician with profile but this time outside the House of Commons. On a Friday evening, in early March, Fisher arrived at a hall in the Montreal suburb of Notre Dame-de-Grace for a debate with the Quebec Liberal minister of natural resources, Rene Levesque. Technicians had set up cameras and microphones for coverage of the debate as part of a *CBC* program that weekend. The *Globe* reporter, William French, described the scene in a column a week later.

Long before the meeting was due to start, all 900 seats in the meeting room – appropriately a gymnasium – were filled and by the scheduled starting time, lobbies and corridors were jammed with people who had no hope getting in but stayed anyway.²⁰⁴

French reminded his readers of the FLQ bombings a year earlier and noted that Montreal is “jittery these days; even though there has been no violence since last summer.”²⁰⁵ That Sunday night the *CBC* program “Inquiry” aired a portion of the debate. Laurier LaPierre hosted “Inquiry” and he also chaired the debate. LaPierre told the TV audience:

Both men avoided the extreme kinds of statement which have so often blurred the dialogue between Canada’s two founding races; both spoke from strong conviction – but in an effort to search for reason – and reasons, in the fundamental problems facing confederation.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ French, William, *Globe and Mail*, March 13, 1964, pg. 7.

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Rene Levesque – Douglas Fisher Debate, Transcript of *CBC* “Inquiry,” March 9, 1964, pg. 2, Library of Parliament, Ottawa.

Levesque spoke of his frustrations with the on going debate about the future of Canada and said; “this is my last effort of communication in English of our basic Canadian problem.”²⁰⁷ He added, “We are in danger of dislocation.”²⁰⁸ Fisher in his opening remarks drew on both his status as politician and journalist to justify his right to represent the view of English-Canada.

I come from a constituency in the center of the country that I think is a microcosm of the whole in English speaking Canada. It is some 90,000 people. I have a newspaper column that goes out to about a circulation of 1,000,000 and from that I get quite a play-back in terms of letters.²⁰⁹

He ended his opening remarks with a line that appeared in papers the next day.

There is a majority there (English Canada) who are waiting for the kind of inspiration from French Canadian leaders and from the Province of Quebec that will say yes we can go on, - the whole is greater than the part.²¹⁰

Levesque jumped on this. “I would say that the part is more vital than the whole to us. Then the whole can live if that is acceptable.”²¹¹ At the end of the discussion, in answer to a question, Levesque confronted separatism. “I could become a separatist, but I am not one. I could become one. I said that, - it’s no big news.”²¹²

The next day the *Toronto Telegram* editors thought Levesque had made news and headlined the front-page story, “I Could Become Separatist.”

In a debate with burly Douglas Fisher the fiery French-Canadian declared: “If English Canada doesn’t know what French Canada wants, then there isn’t much point of discussing further. This is my last communication in English on the topic of what English Canada should think of French Canada’s aspirations.”²¹³

²⁰⁷ *ibid.* pg. 4.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.* pg. 6.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*

²¹⁰ *ibid.* pg. 9.

²¹¹ *ibid.*

²¹² *ibid.* pg. 12.

²¹³ *Toronto Telegram*, March 7, 1964, pg. 1.

The *Star* used a report from Canadian Press headlined, “Quebec’s Levesque ‘fed up’ with bicultural efforts.”²¹⁴ The *Globe* played the story on page one, “Biculturalism Failing Levesque Warns Rally.”²¹⁵ Newspapers in Quebec, both English and French, also played the debate prominently.

The following Tuesday Fisher told his readers about the back-story the night of the debate. Levesque had refused to let Montreal radio stations cover the debate live. Because of the dispute, the debate was delayed more than hour. Fisher explained the reason Levesque refused to let radio air it.

Mr. Levesque is fed up with the way his phrases are picked up and distorted. As an ex-radio, ex-TV man, he is irreverent towards the trade. All this explains his ukase (sic) against radio and the 19 or so mikes which spiked the platform for our so-called debate. The nasty snarls this brought from the radio people led into his statement that he is never again going to speak in English on the relations between French and English Canada.²¹⁶

Fisher had provided a thorough reader of the debate coverage with context about Levesque’s statement about using English. He also sought to paint a picture of Levesque that made him less an ogre and more human. Fisher realized Levesque was at home on television. “Ideally, his *métier* would be the small assembly of peers and friends or better still, direct candor with the television viewer.”²¹⁷ Only the participant, who had waited while the radio controversy was resolved, listened and had the chance to chat backstage with Levesque could observe and report these details to his readers. Fisher didn’t go over the ground covered in the news coverage

²¹⁴ *Toronto Star*, March 7, 1964, pg. 1.

²¹⁵ *Globe and Mail*, March 7, 1964, pg. 1.

²¹⁶ *Toronto Telegram*, March 10, 1964, pg. 7.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

that weekend. Instead he used his column, now called “Inside Politics”, to give Canadians a glimpse of the man who Quebeckers would elect Premier 12 years later.

The Fisher – Levesque debate aired nationally on *CBC* TV. As a politician Fisher always understood the power of television. During his time as an MP free-time political broadcasts were a regular feature on *CBC* and, over the years, Fisher appeared for both the CCF and NDP. The *Star* television critic Dennis Braithwaite reviewed one appearance in 1960.

The CCF performed a small but worthwhile public service last night by devoting its free time political talk period to a primer description of how Parliament works. M.P.’s Douglas Fisher of Port Arthur and Frank Howard of Skeena got in a few licks for their party but were much more concerned about explaining the ins and outs of parliamentary affairs, a subject on which only politicians and a handful of press gallery reporters are really informed. Might be an idea for the *CBC* to pick up.²¹⁸

In the fall of 1961, after the NDP elected Tommy Douglas as its leader, Fisher offered to line up experts to work with Douglas to improve his TV presentation skills. Fisher explained his plan to the federal secretary of the NDP, Carl Hamilton; “Each one has some ideas now on the weaknesses and strengths of Mr. Douglas on television.”²¹⁹ Douglas wrote Hamilton a week later that he wanted to get help “with television techniques,” adding “I am a rank amateur in this field and will be only too happy to take advice from anyone who is willing to give it.”²²⁰

The NDP booked Fisher to front the party’s telecast on “The Nation’s Business” on March 11, 1964. In the weeks leading up to the broadcast the leadership discussed the importance of the program. Douglas wrote Terry Grier, the NDP’s federal secretary;

²¹⁸ *Toronto Star*, January 8, 1960, pg. 23.

²¹⁹ CCF/NDP Papers, Fisher letter to Carl Hamilton, October 29, 1961, MG-28 Series IV 1, Volume 35, File “Nation’s Business – CBC – 1961-1962 Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

²²⁰ CCF/NDP Papers, T.C. Douglas letter to Carl Hamilton, November 6, 1961, MG-28 Series IV 1.

“We don’t have too many chances for national telecasts and I think we should make the maximum use of this one.”²²¹ A week before the program Grier sent out a release promoting Fisher’s topic “Why the New Democratic Party supports the Canada Pension Plan.”

It is a coincidence that Fisher appeared on the TV program “Inquiry” the same month that he handled the NDP turn on “The Nation’s Business” and began his own weekly television program. However Fisher worked behind the scenes to increase his television appearances. We know that when Bassett hired Fisher to write for the *Telegram* part of the deal included a weekly television show. Two years earlier Bassett used Fisher to interview him on his brand new station, *CFTO*. The *Telegram* ran an advertisement promoting the program. “Douglas Fisher, M.P., the outspoken Member of Parliament interviews John Bassett”²²²

While an MP Fisher also worked on television shows for *CBC* and he recalls the controversy that caused.

Then I did something else that was supposed to be illegal. Stanley Knowles said it was illegal and that was taking money for work done for *CBC* being a politician. You weren’t supposed to do it. And I said the hell with that. I went together with Jean Luc Pepin, who at that time was not an MP. We did a big two-hour program about the organization of parliament or some damn thing. Anyway we spent a lot of time at it. Then they sent the check and a little note went with it. There is a legal empty hole here. You must understand that some or most politicians don’t cash checks. I went ahead and did it. I was not going to do all that work and not get remuneration.²²³

²²¹ CCF/NDP Papers, Douglas letter to Terry Grier, February 24, 1964, MG-28, Series VI 1, Volume 435, File “Nation’s Business – CBC – 1964 –1965 #2, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

²²² *Toronto Telegram*, May 13, 1962.

²²³ Fisher, interview, November 9, 2008.

Fisher's program was first listed in the *Star* and the *Telegram* television listings on March 21, 1964. The program aired on Sunday March 22, 1964. The *Telegram* TV listing read, "Doug Fisher and Michael Starr" at 4:30 in the afternoon.²²⁴ The *Star* called the program "Doug Fisher and..." The guest, Michael Starr, was a Conservative MP from Oshawa. The next week the minister of defense, Paul Hellyer, was Fisher's guest. Over the coming months the program aired at various times but usually on Sunday afternoon. On October 4 the show was moved to Sunday night after the local news at 11:40 and it stayed there during the rest of Fisher's time as a member of parliament. It is difficult to assess and gauge the impact of Fisher's television work in this period because the programs no longer exist and there are very few references to it in the Toronto newspapers.

However Fisher's journalism did attract the attention of his colleagues in the House of Commons and in the Ottawa press gallery. In his last year in parliament there are a number of references to Fisher's journalism some quite biting in tone. For example David Hahn (Liberal, Broadview) was blunt in this attack in the House of Commons on October 9, 1964.

Hahn: In addition to the hon. member's other activities, how much time does he spend collecting and writing this gossip, innuendo and behind the curtains tittle-tattle which is printed in the newspaper? Does this activity of collecting, assembling and writing this material really serve the country and his constituents? Is he acting in the best interests of his constituents and his party when he has to cross a picket line to publish his column?

Fisher: That is not true.

Hahn: Is it possible that even in this house, sitting behind his desk, he is thinking about writing this column when he should be doing what the rest of us do in similar circumstances – that is, read the daily

²²⁴ *Toronto Telegram*, TV listing, March 21, 1964.

newspapers? Does he stay in parliament to hold his job as a columnist, or does he hold the job as a columnist to maintain his seat in parliament?²²⁵

A few minutes later Real Caouette, the leader of the Social Credit Party, who frequently criticized Fisher for his position on Quebec, rose to defend Fisher.

The hon. member for Port Arthur is certainly entitled to write in the newspapers and emcee a television program. He even invited me to appear on his program once, and although we may not share the same political views I must admit my fellow member's television program is objective. He endeavors to inform the public by making use of every political faction in the country and allowing them to express their opinion very freely.²²⁶

In 1965 Diefenbaker addressed the advantage Fisher held as a politician – journalist.

The hon. Member for Port Arthur said that the matter should not be discussed. I have quite an admiration for the duality of his capacity from day to day. He sits on Mount Olympus and the press determines the relative position, capacity and ability of every Member of this House.

Mr. Churchill: Except himself.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker, I say to the hon. gentleman that it is given to few of us to be so high that we can look down on others and point out their weaknesses and then determine their qualifications by numbers. So far as the Members of the House are concerned, we receive daily treatment in this regard. No other Member of the press can do it because there is none so close to us. The others look down to us from above; he is on our level. Therefore he is able to speak with that detachment which comes from knowledge and wisdom.²²⁷

After Diefenbaker took his seat, Prime Minister Pearson added a few of his own words. “Mr. Speaker, I should say at once that I do not intend to follow the right hon.

²²⁵ Canada, House of Commons, *Proceedings and Debates (Hansard)*, 26th Parliament, 2nd Session, Vol. 8, pg. 8960, October 9, 1964, Ottawa.

²²⁶ *ibid.* pg. 8963. Note: The *Toronto Star* carried an account of at least one television program with Caouette and Fisher. “The most amusing appearance of Mr. Caouette on English TV was on the ‘Pierre Berton Hour’ before the dissolution of parliament. Berton enlisted the services of broadcaster-newsman Charles Lynch and M.P. Douglas Fisher, of the New Democratic Party. Together, they were going to show viewers the ‘real Caouette.’” *Toronto Star*, March 30, 1963, pg. 23.

²²⁷ Canada, House of Commons, *Proceedings and Debates (Hansard)*, 26th Parliament, 3rd Session, Vol. 2, pg. 2108, June 8, 1965, Ottawa.

gentleman to the summit of Mount Olympus and discuss those who dwell in majesty thereon.”²²⁸ Fisher didn’t let Diefenbaker’s comments go.

I cannot help but thank the leader of the opposition for his notice of my activities. I must suggest to him that he probably has been much too assiduous in following what I write he assumes it appears every day. I might mention to him that that great parliamentarian, the greatest of the great to whom he referred and who is immortal to everyone, can be remembered for the fact that throughout his career he acted as both a lecturer and a journalist, almost as a steady vocation particularly in his yearly years, and I know he will appreciate it if I take such a gentleman as Mr. Churchill as my model.²²⁹

Diefenbaker clearly appreciated the response as Hansard recorded him saying: “Hear, hear.”

Three months later Fisher announced his retirement from politics and his role as a politician-journalist led the *Globe*’s editorialist to question his stated reasons for going.

We have (or more accurately we do not have) Mr. Douglas Fisher, the versatile deputy leader of the New Democratic party, newspaper columnist and member for Port Arthur; who announced Wednesday that he would not be a candidate in the November 8 election. He explained: “My wife and I have a family of boys but I’ve become a stranger to them. I’ve had to ask myself which come first, your family or politics? And the answer had to be family.”

Yet many people who regret Mr. Fisher’s departure will wonder why his moonlighting activities were not the first to go. Did it have anything to do with his observation in a recent panel discussion that the institution of Parliament had become decadent?²³⁰

The same day Peter Newman, then the *Star*’s columnist in Ottawa, devoted his column to Fisher’s parliamentary career saying his journalism upset his NDP colleagues.

²²⁸ *ibid.* pg. 2109.

²²⁹ *ibid.* pg. 2122.

²³⁰ *Globe and Mail*, Editorial, September 11, 1965, pg. 7.

Resentment was fanned further by Fisher's noisy successes as a newspaper columnist and TV host. Although he doesn't say so, this animosity within his own party wore him down. Just before he quit politics, he toyed briefly with the idea of joining the Conservatives. But in the end he realized that such a move would be misunderstood, and that by declining to run again he was only formalizing an inevitable separation.²³¹

So why did Fisher leave politics? An interview with Peter Stursberg in 1976 raised a number of the issues that went into Fisher's decision.

I was burned out to a degree. I'd worked terribly hard. I had substantial family difficulties... You see, the more attention you get... and the column, and being a vigorous spokesman in the House brought me an enormous amount of mail... And the real question really became, well, being fascinated with politics there was a possibility of a career in the media.²³²

Fisher told me he considered staying in politics to seek the leadership of the NDP but his lack of French was only one of the problems.

I didn't have the ultimate ambition and one of the reasons was the French thing. The party had been dominated for years by David Lewis. He had fostered or given way to 'a call David' or 'worship David.'²³³

However his explanation to Tom Earle referred back to pressures on him because of his various commitments.

The temptation to escape from this treadmill and get into something where I would have, in some ways, as much influence on the political process as I was having in the House became quite attractive."²³⁴

Fisher did his journalism while the deputy house leader of the NDP. Brian Mulroney believes a Conservative or Liberal MP would have had more difficulty combining the two.

²³¹ Newman, Peter, *Toronto Star*, September 11, 1965, pg. 7.

²³² Fisher, interview to Stursberg, July 2, 1976, pgs. 12-15.

²³³ Fisher, interview March 22, 2009.

²³⁴ Fisher, interview to Tom Earle, pg. 101.

It probably was because the NDP has traditionally been a very intelligent group of people but unthreatening politically. No one ever thought they were going to form a government. So you know that tended NDP members a fair amount of latitude.²³⁵

Tom Kent worked for the Liberal Party in Ottawa during Fisher's years as a politician – journalist and he concurred with Mulroney on this point.

I don't think it could happen then or could happen now for an MP for the Liberal or Conservative party. The big parties. But the NDP at that time was a very tiny party and Doug Fisher was, I think from the beginning, not much of a politician. I don't say that critically, don't misunderstand me, but he went to Ottawa on the great reputation as a giant killer. He defeated C.D. Howe. But by temperament I don't think he was much of a party man himself. Certainly he was in a party that didn't have much relevance as a party. I don't think he was very much of a party man. He was far more by temperament a commentator.²³⁶

Fisher, looking back on those years of politics and journalism, says there was never a formal complaint.

The surprising thing when I look back on my time as an MP, and for the period following the time I was an MP, for another ten years, nobody raised anything about it except for Diefenbaker. They could have easily...because I was using facilities and space and material...Today nobody would get away with it.²³⁷

Would it have been possible for an MP from one of the two big parties to do both? "I think the Liberal caucus would be the tough one. Not the Tories...what amazes me, as I look back, is how I ever got away with it."²³⁸

As 1965 drew to an end the politician-participant, now 46, decided to flip the roles and become a journalist-observer. He concluded that he could find ways to remain a participant. Fisher decided to trade in the risky occupation of an elected politician

²³⁵ Mulroney, interview, March 27, 2009.

²³⁶ Kent, interview, April 1, 2009.

²³⁷ Fisher, interview, November 16, 2008

²³⁸ Fisher, interview, November 9, 2008.

moonlighting as a journalist for a basket of jobs that brought him more financial stability, less travel and more time with his family. “I had income possible and I did exploit the labour relations, magazine writing, script writing and then television performing.”²³⁹

After Douglas Fisher left politics to become a full-time journalist he remembers Liberal member of parliament, Gerard Pelletier, coming to see him. Pelletier was trying to do what Fisher had done, write a column while an MP.

He said, “You are no longer in the House but you are still covering things very closely. How do you do it? Don’t you get repercussions?” He said, “every time I write anything for *Le Devoir* I get jumped on, I get jumped on by my colleagues.” My argument to him was you play fair as you can and as accurately as you can and see how it rides. And I took it that if no one ever took it too far to protest it was because I was respected.²⁴⁰

In his years as an MP Fisher had established his reputation. A small sampling of opinions is revealing. Editorial writers labeled him a “maverick,”²⁴¹ a reporter called him “l’enfant terrible”²⁴² of the House of Commons, a fellow politician summed up his contribution saying, “Canada’s House of Commons contains only one independent, non-conforming thinker and speaker – Douglas Fisher,”²⁴³

The columnist, Peter Newman, observed Fisher was “the most widely read member of parliament” and he wrote his “manner in Ottawa was that of a wry, disengaged observer.”²⁴⁴ Through those years Fisher had a knack for making sure he was noticed and in 1965 he turned to full time journalism determined to be fair and provocative. “I wasn’t inside the whale anymore (an MP) but I could guess a great deal from the guys

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Fisher, interview December 6, 2008. Note: In 1965 Pelletier had a column, “Inside Quebec,” in the *Toronto Telegram*.

²⁴¹ *Toronto Star*, January 30, 1960, pg. 6.

²⁴² *Globe and Mail*, January 29, 1960, pg. 1.

²⁴³ Service, James, North York Councilor, *Toronto Star*, November 30, pg. 27.

²⁴⁴ Newman, Peter, *Toronto Star*, September 11, 1965, pg. 7.

I knew.” While Newman foresaw the observer role that Fisher would turn to, Fisher was not through as a participant.

What are the lines I am going to pursue that I want? I want to change the face of the world. Well there’s the sports thing, the Indian thing and there’s the forestry thing. I became a lobbyist; I didn’t have anyone paying me.²⁴⁵

So he remained a participant-observer with the emphasis now on observation and a maverick not as a member of parliament but as a member of the Ottawa press gallery.

²⁴⁵ Fisher, interview November 9, 2008.

Chapter 3

Observer-Participant – 1965-2006

Political Columnists

Before turning to the journalism phase of Fisher's career it is important to set in context the role columnists played in the mid-sixties. The point has already been made that for most daily newspapers the Ottawa based political column was still a new addition to opinion pages. There were only a handful of regular columnists and few syndicated columnists available to readers across Canada. Peter Newman was the most widely read columnist in the country. By the end of the 1960s "his columns appeared in 30 newspapers, reaching two million readers."²⁴⁶

In the 1960s American journalism professor Ben Bagdikian wrote a series of articles for the *Columbia Journalism Review* about political columnists. In the first article he said newspapers felt a need to present "the other side" and the columnist did that "as the news became more complex, as educational levels increased, so did the use of the political column. With it grew its role of counter-balancing a paper's editorials."²⁴⁷ Another journalism professor, Eugene Webb, wrote, "it is the columnist's role to express opinions and to his elite position is attributed power and prestige." Webb quoted the American columnist Russell Baker that columnists are

²⁴⁶ Desourdie, Todd, A Study of the Cyclical Nature of Prime Minister-Press Gallery Relations, 1963-88, MA Thesis, University of Toronto, 1997, pg. 17.

²⁴⁷ Bagdikian, Ben, "How newspapers use columnists", *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 1964, pg. 20.

“...the lordly Brahmans, the high priests to whom great men look anxiously for omens of approbation or disfavor”²⁴⁸

Some of this happened in Canada as well. Paul Rutherford, professor at the University of Toronto wrote:

After the mid-1950s, the big city dailies shed their penchant for social trivia, cut back on the coverage of world affairs, beefed up their surveillance of the local and national communities, and expanded their editorial and opinion offerings.²⁴⁹

David Taras, professor at the University of Calgary said in Canada:

Critical journalism began to emerge in the 1960s. The premise behind critical journalism is that journalists, as professionals and as delegates of the audience, have an obligation to comment on as well as report the news.²⁵⁰

It is difficult to assess the importance of Canadian political columnists then or now.

More than 20 years ago Lloyd Tataryn, in his book, *The Pundits*, wrote:

Every columnist interviewed while collecting material for this book agreed that, on the whole, whereas the vast majority of the (New York) Times' columns deal with issues, Canadian columnists overwhelmingly focus on political personalities.²⁵¹

It is useful then to turn to an editor of the *New York Times*, Lester Markel, writing in 1962.

In too many newspapers the editor has surrendered to the columnist. People seem to require opinions for prestige reasons and, more often than not, these opinions are borrowed. So they are likely to turn to their favorite columnists who are, even if inaccurate, always positive. The columnists supply light in limited degree; but they do not take the place of the old-fashioned hard-hitting editorial page.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Webb, Eugene, “One way to tell a columnist”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 1962, pg. 23.

²⁴⁹ Rutherford, Paul, *The Making of the Canadian Media*, (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978).pg. 88.

²⁵⁰ Taras, David, *The Newsmakers*, (Toronto, Nelson Publishing, 1990) pg. 54.

²⁵¹ Tataryn, Lloyd, *The Pundits*, (Toronto, Deneau, 1990) pg. 150.

²⁵² Markel Lester, “The Real Sins of the Press,” *Harper's Magazine*, December 1962, pg. 87.

One of Markel's examples of the time was Walter Lippmann and his "cerebral group" of readers. Lippmann was widely used in Canadian newspapers and Markel noted that syndicated columns "cannot be written in community language or from a community viewpoint."²⁵³

²⁵³ *ibid.*

Columnist - Participant

After the election call in 1965 Fisher went from two to three columns a week. The *Toronto Telegram* put Fisher's decision to leave politics on page one.

He will cover the Ontario scene for The Telegram and CFTO-TV during the current election campaign. His Page Seven (sic) column will appear from Ottawa regularly during the election and thereafter.²⁵⁴

Fisher did not write about his decision in his columns. Instead he turned immediately to predicting a narrow Liberal majority.²⁵⁵ In his next columns Fisher presented a two-part series; "A Dissection of Pertinent Issues." Both were much longer than his usual pieces. The first focused on the question of national unity and the second on economic issues.²⁵⁶

During the campaign Fisher participated politically. He spoke at the NDP Port Arthur nomination meeting and was quoted as saying, "Liberals and Conservatives would tear each other apart during the campaign."²⁵⁷ He delivered speeches to the Empire Club in Toronto and the Canadian Club in Ottawa. Both drew the attention of the media. Fisher was also on the platform at a big NDP rally at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto and introduced the leader of the Quebec wing of the party, Robert Cliche.²⁵⁸

In a column on November 6, at the end of the campaign, Fisher returned to his prediction of a slim Liberal majority. The participant-observer is very much at work in the way Fisher framed this column.

²⁵⁴ *Toronto Telegram*, September 9, 1965, pg. 1.

²⁵⁵ *Toronto Telegram*, September 10, 1965, pg. 7.

²⁵⁶ *Toronto Telegram*, September 14 & 19, 1965, pg. 7.

²⁵⁷ *Globe and Mail*, September 20, 1965, pg. 8.

²⁵⁸ *Globe and Mail*, November 4, 1965, pg. 11.

Contrary to the (sic) most newsmen, I have sensed an erosion in Pearson strength in Ontario this past week. It does seem possible, if far from a certainty, that the expected gains in Quebec for the Liberals could be cancelled out in this province.

Those of us who are partisan have our hopes and dreams for our own party. Unlike many New Democrats I do not wish a minority Parliament, particularly in order to have the NDP in a leverage position. For the good of the Left in Canadian politics, for the good of reform and a progressive approach to the economy, for the good of threatened elements of radicalism in the Liberal party, the vital point is that we do not have a Liberal sweep.²⁵⁹

While Fisher referred to himself as both a newsman and a partisan it is worth noting that the editors of the *Telegram* did not acknowledge Fisher's party affiliation during the campaign. This lack of disclosure by the editors would carry forward for a few months. Fisher knew he had to decide if he would be a columnist carrying a NDP tag or not.

The toughest thing of all was if I was going to play it, like Gerry Caplan and Dalton Camp²⁶⁰ and so on, as a partisan or am I going to be neutral? After two years, about I guess, I dropped my membership²⁶¹. I tried to play it down the centre until I was getting more shit for my positions and attitudes from my former colleagues than I was from anybody else.²⁶²

Suddenly on March 22, 1966 the *Telegram* began adding a note at the end of Fisher's columns. In brackets it said, "Mr. Fisher is a former NDP Member of Parliament."²⁶³ Fisher isn't sure why this happened. He recalls one incident during the 1965 campaign involving Diefenbaker.

Diefenbaker was in Toronto and he was given a copy of the *Telegram* and there was a column of mine there making fun of the Conservative campaign to this point. And Dief just exploded with John Bassett. Anyway they backed down and changed something. There was an

²⁵⁹ *Toronto Telegram*, November 6, 1965, pg. 7. The Liberals won a minority government.

²⁶⁰ Kaplan and Camp were strategists for the NDP and Conservatives and both had newspaper columns

²⁶¹ Fisher dropped his membership in 1969.

²⁶² Fisher interview, November 9, 2008.

²⁶³ *Toronto Telegram*, March 22, 1966. pg. 7.

uproar over it. Bassett didn't bother to phone me but his editor did. He said we're going easy on you because the Conservatives are complaining.²⁶⁴

Since the insertion acknowledging Fisher's political affiliation didn't happen until almost five months later it is unlikely this incident instigated it. What is interesting is the *Telegram* ran this for only a few weeks. On May 12 it was dropped and didn't re-appear.

One can only speculate why it popped up for this short period. It was probably a coincidence but Fisher's column on May 12 was about being a columnist. He reviewed a book about the press in Washington applying some of the insights in the book to Ottawa noting that Canada had only eight political columnists compared to the "swarm" in Washington. Fisher quoted one "paragraph that hit me" from the book.

Too much column writing today is a mere rehash of the news that has already been printed, gravied over with whatever the columnist thinks about it, and dished out in what he thinks is his own inimitable style. And all too often, the personal opinion columns with their big "I think..." or "I believe..." are the results to mere head scratching, thumb sucking and fingernail biting."²⁶⁵

Looking back Fisher says the *Globe and Mail* columnist, George Bain, was "the closest to the perfect columnist" and the columnist he tried to emulate. He adds, "I think what got him so much respect in the trade was that he eased up on the partisanship and he was judged on fairness and competence."²⁶⁶ When asked if that

²⁶⁴ Fisher interview, December 6, 2008.

²⁶⁵ *Toronto Telegram*, May 12, 1966, pg. 7. The book Fisher reviewed and quoted is *The Press in Washington* by Peter Edson.

²⁶⁶ Fisher interview March 22, 2009.

was Fisher's style he responded: "Yes. But George tended to spread his, what would I say, his common sense, a bit wider than I did."²⁶⁷

In the fall of 1966 Fisher took on a partner for his column. "I deliberately was looking to spread my interests and that was the thing Crowe gave to me."²⁶⁸ Harry Crowe, an historian, was a professor at York University. Like Fisher, he was a man with many interests, including an activist in the labour movement, an authority on the writings of Pierre Elliott Trudeau and a recent researcher for the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission. According to Fisher, "Crowe was, I think he was, a pure communist. He couldn't stand the Trots and the Stalinists."²⁶⁹ Fisher recalls that the two split the column writing duties but they always both vetted columns.

We'd never let it go without the other guy having a hand. I'd say we used to spend three or four hours a day on the phone with each other going over it. Our main difficulty was not of ideas. It was of grammar and vocabulary. Harry had a much more sociological vocabulary and very few colloquialisms compared to what I used.²⁷⁰

Fisher announced the change to his readers in his column, "Exit Douglas Fisher, Enter Fisher and Crowe" on September 21, 1966.

Our column...will be a joint one, not an alternating of authors. That is, we shall consult together and write together. In most matters we are not identical twins but we share views on nationalism and the kind of Canada we want. Each of us is an ordinary member of the New Democratic Party. Neither of us, however, is so orthodox or consistent in our party attitudes that we could be labeled as typical New Democrats.

And many members of that party, especially the elected leaders and officials, would cry: "Heaven forbid that Crowe and Fisher be considered spokesmen or publicists for us."²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ *ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*

²⁶⁹ Fisher interview December 6, 2008.

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

²⁷¹ Fisher, *Toronto Telegram*, September 21, 1966. pg. 7. The Fisher-Crowe column lasted three years.

Fisher explained the benefits of having Crowe with him. “He brings to our new venture both academic lore and much more knowledge than I possess on labor history and economics.”²⁷²

With Crowe as a partner the column now ran five times a week, Monday to Friday. *Time Magazine* did a short piece on “Canada’s only tandem political column” declaring they showed “a refreshing readiness to write as if Ottawa were less than the hub of the universe.”²⁷³ It praised the column for its “bifocal view.”

Their combined aim, says Fisher, is to “popularize that shadow area between the academics – the experts – and the general public, including politicians.” Fisher and Crowe most successfully banish shadows on such subjects as education or labor that other columnists ignore – and are not afraid to sometimes contradict each other.²⁷⁴

A letter to Fisher and Crowe expressed one reader’s view on the teaming of the two writers. “I had my doubts about joint Fisher and Crowe articles when they were announced – not that I was against Fisher Crowe – far from it; I was just doubtful about a “joint” column.”²⁷⁵

The first “Douglas Fisher and Harry Crowe” column staked out its new territory clearly. Headlined “Let no historian put Confederation asunder,” it was a learned discussion on the survival of the “nation-state of Canada.” It referenced recent writings and speeches by three Canadian historians: Donald Creighton, Michel Brunet and Ramsay Cook. It tossed out a name like Abbe Lionel Groulx (an early Quebec nationalist) with no explanation. The column assumed a knowledge of the work of Henri Bourassa and it referred to a whole group of leading French Canadians by their

²⁷² *ibid.*

²⁷³ *Time Magazine*, December 16, 1966, pg. 12.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Harry Crowe Fonds, James Miller letter to Fisher & Crowe, FO 297 CB SC, 1981-012-\\21 File 3, York University, Toronto.

last name only including (Charles) Taylor, (Andre) Laurendeau and (Robert) Cliche. However at the end of the piece their own take on Canada, written in the days of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, is revealed.

The primary responsibility of political leadership in Canada is to see that a balance between the legitimate goals of Canadians and French Canadians should be maintained. The adjustments which seem to be indicated at the moment are the greater linguistic and cultural accommodations for French Canada on the Ottawa level and generally outside Quebec, and accommodation by French Canada at a wider range of operations by the Federal Government within the economy.²⁷⁶

With the addition of Crowe, Fisher accomplished a number of things; the five-day column meant regular exposure in the *Telegram* and in the other newspapers across the country that used it; it meant Fisher had more time for his television work that now included his own program, as well as appearances on *CJOH* newscasts and on *CTV* political specials and it made it possible for him to work on his other policy interests.

While Fisher's work as a columnist had supporters there were also detractors. This is clear from a piece, "Rating the Ottawa Press Gallery," in the January 1968 *Saturday Night*.²⁷⁷ Writer Jack Batten assessed the positives and negatives of five Ottawa columnists: Fisher, George Bain, Blair Fraser, Charles Lynch and Peter Newman. He started with Fisher and the negatives came fast and furious. He described Fisher's personal style.

Doggedly backwoods. Takes his shoes off in hosts' parlours, rolls his own cigarettes, belches, interrupts and generally conceals a first-class mind a scholarly education and a professional pol's savvy (eight years an NDP MP) under a barefoot-boy-with-cheek exterior.

Batten wasn't finished.

²⁷⁶ Fisher and Crowe, *Toronto Telegram*, September 22, 1966.

²⁷⁷ Batten, Jack, "Rating the Ottawa Press Gallery," *Saturday Night*, January 1968, pg. 20.

Cabinet reaction: Loathing. “Fisher is not a gentleman,” they say, correctly. Members of the Press Gallery share the cabinet’s dislike of Fisher because (a) he was accustomed to slicing up reporters in his MP speeches and (b) he conducted a bi-weekly newspaper column while he was in the House, an unforgivable transgression.

Batten noted that the addition of Crowe had “cost Fisher four papers including the Montreal Star” and yet admitted, “the column still deals with labour, education and constitutional issues more sharply than any other, and Fisher still describes the political process with a tough, in-fighting old pol’s skill.”

The article, which is much kinder to the other four columnists, showed vividly that Fisher had his enemies, in this piece all anonymous, but still his editorial contribution was undeniable.

The Fisher-Crowe column chronicled the end of the Diefenbaker – Pearson era. Canada’s federal political map changed. Fisher would be an on air commentator for *CTV* as leadership conventions became live television events. The Conservatives chose Robert Stanfield and the Liberals selected Pierre Trudeau. With that done the stage was set for Fisher, the observer, to resume an active political participant role.

Columnist-Candidate, June 1968

In early May 1968 Fisher became the NDP candidate in York Centre. An editorial in the *Telegram* welcomed “journalist-politician Doug Fisher back to the political wars” saying, “The journalist-politician is by no means a rarity in Canada. The *Telegram* a few years ago had three members of its staff, plus Mr. Fisher, running in one election.” The editorial criticized “the attitude of the *CBC* in forcing announcer Bruce Rogers to resign because he is seeking an NDP nomination...the normal course would be to grant an employee leave of absence to campaign.”²⁷⁸ Former Toronto mayor, Phil Givens, had to give up his radio talk show on *CHUM* to run for the Liberals. He complained:

If I was writing for a newspaper the (Telegram columnist) Douglas Fisher is – he’s writing on political matters everyday – that would be okay” Mr. Givens said, “But because I work for a radio station, I have to go off the air.”²⁷⁹

With less than a week to go in the campaign the *Toronto Star* filed a report, “York Centre has Big Panda Fisher worried,” on the Fisher campaign.

While Fisher’s colleagues on newspapers, radio and TV confidently mutter, “Fisher will win, his strategy team has an estimate the win will be by 800 votes.”

“You know, the recognition isn’t very high,” he says. A strange comment since his face is a familiar one on TV tubes and his column runs in the *Telegram*. “But out in that area,” his pointing finger points north, “the *Star* outsells the *Tely* five to one.”

If elected, Fisher will probably end his column, he says, after the NDP makes a decision in caucus. He admits candidly that he wants to concentrate on his House of Commons job as a full-time career...I also have ambitions,” he says frankly. One is a determination to be in the

²⁷⁸ *Toronto Telegram*, May 8, 1968, pg. 6.

²⁷⁹ *Globe and Mail*, May 24, 1968, pg. 8. Note: The CRTC ruled Givens could not continue his program while a candidate.

leadership race to replace T.C. Douglas, who is expected to retire next year.”²⁸⁰

While Fisher campaigned, he continued to write his column with Crowe. How did that column report the federal campaign? What disclosure was used to tell the reader that one of the tandem was a candidate? How did it compare to other political columns in the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail* and his own paper, the *Telegram*? Columns written between June 17 and July 2 were reviewed to gauge the coverage.

Before looking at Fisher-Crowe I will review the *Globe* and *Star* columnists.

The lead columnist for the *Globe and Mail* was George Bain. He wrote 11 columns that ran on the editorial or opinion pages of the paper. In the days leading up to the election Bain assessed the campaign in Saskatchewan predicting the Liberals could pick up 3 or 4 seats there. He filed a piece on Liberal ads that the Conservatives had complained about and the next day Trudeau announced the ads would be pulled. Over the next two days he wrote columns based on an interview with NDP leader Tommy Douglas. His column on June 22 endorsed Trudeau. “Unless every sign is misleading, the Liberals, led by Pierre Trudeau, will form the government after Tuesday. That, for quite a while, has seemed from here a desirable result.” The June 24 report was one of Bain’s “Letter from Lilac” columns, a tongue-in-cheek piece about the campaign. Then, on election day, Bain again predicted a Trudeau win as a “virtual certainty.” The day after the election Bain’s column, “Like Wow” reviewed the big Trudeau victory but observed that Atlantic Canada was “immune” to Trudeau. The next day he assessed the impact of the results on Stanfield and the Conservatives. June 28 found Bain warning the new MPs that being a back-bencher is not a ticket to fame. “If,

²⁸⁰ *Toronto Star*, June 21, 1968, pg. 9.

when you look for an apartment, you say, ‘I am a member of Parliament,’ the best you can expect is a look of glacial disinterest.” The final Bain column in the period reviewed was a look at what the Trudeau cabinet might look like.

Anthony Westell wrote three page seven pieces. The first on June 18 looked at the Douglas campaign and the other one before the election was a companion to Bain’s Trudeau piece on June 22. Westell discussed Stanfield’s effectiveness as a candidate and his need for a bit of the Trudeau charisma. The day after the election Westell’s analysis piece looked at the immediate job ahead for Trudeau. Reporter John Burns landed on page seven with a piece on the big Trudeau rally at Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto. If one includes those four as columns the *Globe* ran a total of 14.²⁸¹

In the *Toronto Star* Peter Newman, the “Ottawa Editor,” was the lead columnist over this two-week period. However Newman only filed five pieces, four before the election and one in the week after. The *Star* played Newman twice on page one giving his reporting greater prominence. The first time was on June 18, the day after Stanfield’s major rally in Toronto. Newman was there and painted a bleak picture of a badly organized rally and noted, “Every time he speaks, it becomes more obvious that Robert Stanfield suffers from a grave political liability: The grief of non-communication.” Two days later Newman was on page seven with his take on the Trudeau rally in Toronto that he called “some kind of public rite, new and strange to the Canadian electoral process.” Newman couldn’t resist comparing the two rallies. “Stanfield came and departed in the dark. Trudeau arrived in the sunlight at City Hall.” His longest piece ran in the *Saturday Star*, again on page 7. Like Bain, Newman assumed a Trudeau win and concluded:

²⁸¹ *Globe and Mail*, June 17 – July 2, 1968

As this campaign comes to an end, deep psychological and historical tides are running in this country. We may be on the verge of a wholly new alignment of the political forces that will shape the destiny of the second century.

The day after the election Newman was again on page one declaring Trudeau had won “a mandate to settle the national unity crisis in Canada.” His final piece ran the following Saturday and outlined the “sophisticated scientific business techniques” that the Trudeau government would rely on. Newman wrote Trudeau’s advisors “will help decide whether Pierre Trudeau’s dramatic intention of launching a new era of participatory politics in Canada remains a hopeful slogan or becomes a vibrant reality.”

The *Star* used a series of pieces by political scientist Peter Reigenstreiff and an opinion piece by the CBC’s Larry Zolf but its only political columnist was Newman.²⁸²

At the *Toronto Telegram* Douglas Fisher and Harry Crowe had 12 columns and all played on page 7. During the campaign Fisher and Crowe decided to use some of their columns to give individual candidates a platform for their ideas. During this period four columns were given over to this, two candidates were Conservatives and two were New Democrats. After the election, in a column on July 2, they said they “realized toward the end of the campaign that the format was confusing many people...Therefore, the way in which the guest columns was presented was inadequate.”

Compared to Bain and Newman, Fisher and Crowe were far more critical of Trudeau and the Liberals. The column on June 17 made three points. First it used direct quotes from Liberals Mitchell Sharp, Eric Kierans and Paul Hellyer and

²⁸² *Toronto Star*, June 17 – July 2, 1968.

Trudeau on the issue of Quebec's status in confederation. They went back to the leaders' debate and translated one of Trudeau's comments in French reporting that, in French, Trudeau was not against special status but against "too much special status." The column also supported an economic figure used by Tommy Douglas during the debate that had been challenged. Finally they criticized the Liberal position on labour. On June 19 Fisher and Crowe picked the same topic as George Bain; the full-page Liberal ads alleging Robert Stanfield "supported two nations and special status for Quebec." The piece repeated some of the points they had made only two days earlier including the Trudeau statement in French in the debate. "The explanation is that the Liberal Party has two policies – one in Quebec and another in the rest of Canada."

On June 24 an attack on Trudeau is front and centre in a column headlined, "Trudolatory- politics of the claque." An interview with Conservative strategist and candidate, Dalton Camp, was the vehicle to bash the Trudeau campaign. "What would he (Camp) think of the teeny-bopper in politics? Or of that disquieting arrival, the press bopper." The column used a series of quotes from their interview with Camp but they saved room for their own take. "It is suddenly as though we didn't need a Parliament or a government, or a set of policies. Leadership, crowdmanship and faith will suffice." The column, the last before the election, didn't predict a Trudeau win instead it simply assumed it. Fisher's chief opposition as a candidate was the Liberal Party. Bain and Newman endorsed Trudeau but Fisher zeroed in on the Liberals and Trudeau time and again.

The day after the election the column began with the Trudeau win, "he had about 15 more seats in him than we had expected," and declared Trudeau's "hands are less tied

than any other PM in our history.” Unlike Bain and Newman, his first post election column included references about the impact of the results on both the Conservatives and the New Democrats. June 27 found the pair appraising “the list of elected and re-elected members.” Throughout his career as a columnist Fisher always made space to reflect on the make-up of the backbench MPs. On June 28 the column focused on labor issues and potential strikes facing the new government. Finally, on July 2, in a column called “Where we went wrong in the election,” Fisher and Crowe considered their coverage of the campaign. “We made mistakes in judgment. We spent too much copy on Mr. Trudeau’s constitutional view, too little on the pattern of the campaign.” This self-criticism of too much time spent on policy led to “our failure to locate, define, and measure the Trudeau sweep.”

Fisher and Crowe spent considerably more time on policy than either Bain or Newman. If the four issue columns by candidates are added then the focus on policy is markedly higher than any of the other political columns including their *Telegram* colleague Lubor Zink. With Zink’s columns added to the Fisher – Crowe tally the *Telegram* ran 24 columns showing a far greater commitment to the political column than either of the other papers reviewed.

What is striking is that in the days leading up to the election there was no disclosure, either by the editors of the *Telegram* or by Fisher, of the fact that Fisher was running for office. Tom Kent says the *Telegram* was at fault in this. “If they failed to tell the readers then I think they were deficient in the proper job of the media.” He maintains disclosure, even in the media environment of 1968, was

required. “I would have expected it at any time. I would have thought that any less than that wasn’t playing fair. The reader is entitled to it.”²⁸³

After the election Fisher mentioned his role in the July 2 column. “The one of us who was a candidate kept getting letters and phone calls.” July 3 saw Fisher and Crowe continue their critical self-examination in a column called “We flubbed as pundits and politicians.” Fisher, who placed a distant second in the election behind the Liberal, James Walker, reviewed his campaign. He did it, as he had as a MP, the participant making his observations with the insider’s take on what happened. For the first time he had to report his political defeat. He took his reader through the campaign explaining the strategy.

We had no choice but to base our campaign on thorough canvassing, three complete ones in fact, carried out by some 350 canvassers...each visit of the canvassers centered around a specific piece of literature...while the relationship in numbers between “positive” votes for us against “hostile” votes for the other candidates was fairly good, two other categories were large and baffling. These were the “possibles” and the “uncommitted.” The third canvass was showing that over half the electorate fell into these categories.²⁸⁴

Fisher had hoped to parlay a win in York Centre into a run for the leadership of the NDP. Instead he headed back to Ottawa still the participant-observer writing the column and now developing a sports policy for Canada.

²⁸³ Kent interview, April 1, 2009.

²⁸⁴ Fisher and Crowe, *Toronto Telegram*, June 17-July 3, 1968, pg. 7.

Columnist-Sport Participant

Douglas Fisher always had an interest in sports and particularly hockey.

When I was a kid in Fort William I used to do the junior hockey report. I was encouraged by my high school teacher to get interested in sports history and I spent an awful lot of time working on that from the time I was 14 or 15. If I got the chance to go to Minneapolis I'd go to the University of Minnesota library where they had marvelous files. When I was at Queens I spent all my time on sports history.²⁸⁵

In the House of Commons Fisher had often addressed sports issues but it was in the late 1960s that Fisher began a more formal involvement with sports, particularly hockey, and with the cabinet ministers who controlled the purse strings for sports in Canada.

There are different versions of how Fisher came to write the final "Report of the Task Force on Sports for Canadians".²⁸⁶ Fisher recalls he "bumped" into the minister of health and welfare, John Munro, and asked him how the task force was coming along.

He said, "I'm desperate, I don't know what to do." I said, "Well I've got myself and somebody else who'll volunteer if you'll let us write it." Within 24 hours we had a little contract, no pay, nothing like that, it just gave us the task of ostensibly putting together what the commission had come up with.²⁸⁷

Chris Lang worked for Munro at the time and was "running the task force" that had completed its work but "we didn't have a story."

I sat down with Munro and he said. "There is only one story teller and it's Doug." So he introduced me to Doug and Doug got Syd (Wise). I

²⁸⁵ Fisher interview, October 17, 2008.

²⁸⁶ "Report on the Task Force on Sports for Canadians," tabled in the House of Commons May 12, 1969, Chairman Harold Rae.

²⁸⁷ Fisher interview, November 23, 2008.

would give them a set of recommendations and tell them how we arrived at it and they wrote it.²⁸⁸

There is a third version. Alan Eagleson worked with Fisher on hockey issues for many years. “Doug was involved with that committee on instructions from Trudeau. From that day until his retirement Doug was trusted by each succeeding Prime Minister and government.”²⁸⁹

Whatever happened, Fisher says the task force was a success.

It was embarrassing almost the way the bigger provinces picked it up and ran with it in terms of establishing what was mammoth...to take amateur sport off the kitchen table and put it on a business plate...Let’s go for what Canadians have their heart in, hockey, football, and so on. This was a fundamental thing. It became a touchstone. Pretty soon everybody in sports organizations referred to it, although bugger all read it, but it got well touted. And Trudeau was interested the reaction was so good to this. So he raised his hand up and said go.²⁹⁰

Chris Lang explained two outcomes of the task force of significance for Fisher. “Out of that came the formation of Hockey Canada so Munro put him on the board, out of that came the formation of the Coaching Association of Canada. Doug got put on the board.”²⁹¹ Any expenses Fisher incurred were paid for but he did not get paid for his services. In the Hockey Canada annual report his occupation is listed as “journalist.”²⁹²

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on Fisher’s role as a participant in Hockey Canada.²⁹³ During his tenure at Hockey Canada Fisher worked with a series

²⁸⁸ Lang interview, May 19, 2009.

²⁸⁹ Eagleson, Alan, email, December 10, 2008.

²⁹⁰ Fisher interview, November 23, 2008.

²⁹¹ Lang interview, May 19, 2009

²⁹² Hockey Canada Fonds, Annual Report, MG 28 I 263, Volume 5, File 300-24 and File 300-25, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁹³ Note: Fisher was also on the Board of Governors at the Sports Hall of Fame. Don Johnson was on the board with Fisher and says for a time Fisher chaired the Board. Email November 11, 2008.

of cabinet ministers and, on occasion, with Prime Minister Trudeau to advance Canada's interests in hockey, especially international hockey. In the 1970s developments in international hockey interested Canadians and the last game of 1972 Canada – Russia series is remembered by a generation of Canadians as one of those “I can tell you where I was” moments when Paul Henderson scored the winning goal. Fisher was a member of the committee that organized the series.²⁹⁴ Lang says Fisher “was the author” of the series. Fisher now says:

I've never advertised this but we wouldn't have had that series with the Russians for another three or four years if I hadn't been there. The key was snuffing out Bunny Ahearne. Get him out of the way. And that is the chore I did. And Trudeau was a big help because, he didn't know that I had arranged it, but he did a nice little five-minute thing on videotape that I took over to an international hockey meeting in Switzerland...it went over very, very big with all these people from Czechoslovakia and the Russians were suitably impressed. The Prime Minister!²⁹⁵

Fisher also prepared a memorandum for Trudeau before a visit by the Prime Minister to the Soviet Union. The undated four-page draft summed up the state of international hockey and outlined the points Trudeau should make. Here are two points Fisher made in the draft.

That Canada will not return to the previous pattern of eligibility since it penalized her and no other country.
That a huge country like Russia with its immense hockey-playing population should wish to meet the best Canadians available and that she could this informally if she is concerned about amateur standing.²⁹⁶

Eagleson acknowledged the importance of Fisher's role on the committee.

²⁹⁴ Note. The other members were Alan Eagleson and Bill Wirtz of the NHL. Eagleson email. December 10, 2008.

²⁹⁵ Fisher interview, March 25, 2009. Note. Bunny Ahearne was the president of the International Ice Hockey Federation.

²⁹⁶ Hockey Canada Fonds, Fisher draft for the Prime Minister's Office, MG 28 I 263, Volume 4, File 300-I, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Doug participated in many direct negotiations with the Soviets and IIHF in the 60s and 70s. He was at my side on several occasions and gave me unstinting support. He would argue his position in a strong but gentlemanly way, and whenever I was out of place he would calm me down.²⁹⁷

Fisher recalls the board “kept telling me ‘you are the only one who can handle Alan Eagleson, Clarence Campbell and Sam Pollock.’”²⁹⁸ Eagleson trusted Fisher completely calling him his “direct contact with the federal government”²⁹⁹ Chris Lang used a hockey analogy to describe Fisher’s relationship with the mercurial Eagleson.

He was the only guy in Hockey Canada who could check Eagleson. Eagleson could not lay a glove on Doug. Doug would not take any crap. Eagleson would take after people and he’d keep looking over his shoulder at Doug. He was afraid of Doug.³⁰⁰

During the 1960s and 1970s Fisher advised a series of Liberal ministers on sports issues. In 1977 he promoted the choice of Iona Campagnolo as Canada’s first Minister of Sport. After her appointment Fisher says, “She said ‘you got me in this office so you’re going to write some speeches for me.’ So I wrote speeches for her.”³⁰¹ Iona Campagnolo acknowledges Fisher’s role calling him a “mentor.” She says, “Fisher was always part of the advisory group that set the policy that delivered whatever direction we took.” Campagnolo cited Fisher’s advice before meetings with

²⁹⁷ Eagleson email, December 10, 2008.

²⁹⁸ Fisher interview, March 25, 2009, Alan Eagleson ran the NHLPA, Clarence Campbell was President of the NHL and Sam Pollock was General Manager of the Montreal Canadiens.

²⁹⁹ Eagleson email, December 10, 2008.

³⁰⁰ Lang interview, May 19 2009.

³⁰¹ Fisher interview, November 23, 2008.

the NHL and his help in “drawing up guidelines” for the inquiry in hockey violence headed by Judge Willard Estey as examples of his on-going influence.³⁰²

Fisher’s work for Hockey Canada was demanding. It involved travel, international negotiations and, perhaps trickiest, negotiations amongst the various factions of hockey in Canada. It put Fisher at the centre of decision making on an issue politicians, and all Canadians, wanted to know about, the state of Canadian hockey. Eagleson says, “Doug never took personal advantage of his position. He never kept a scoop or major story to himself. He never broke a story which he could have done hundreds of times.”³⁰³ Campagnolo says, “It never seemed to me that he was in a conflict of interest. He seemed capable of keeping the silos separate in his mind.”³⁰⁴ Chris Lang, who was with Fisher throughout the Hockey Canada years says, “He never wrote on the policy...He never abused his position at all.”³⁰⁵

However Fisher did write about Hockey Canada from the very beginning. Even before the government released the task force report on May 12, 1969 John Munro had created Hockey Canada. Fisher was one of his nominees on the board and the June issue of *Commentator* found Fisher’s piece “Hockey Canada.” The article began by stating what could not be said. The participant set his ground rules for the observer.

At the second meeting of the Board of Hockey Canada, Inc., a resolution was carried which put the responsibility for statements and news releases upon the president, Max Bell, and the managing director, Leighton “Hap” Emms. The reasons behind the concern to

³⁰² Campagnolo, Iona, interview with the author, March 16 2009. Note: The Estey Commission was struck after the World Championships in Vienna in 1977. The Canadian team rough play was headline news.

³⁰³ Eagleson email, December 10,2008

³⁰⁴ Campagnolo interview, March 16, 2009.

³⁰⁵ Land interview, May 19, 2009.

restrict and control information about this new and strange corporation will become clearer to the reader as time goes on. It isn't easy to describe and explain the corporation without breaching the very first resolution I voted for as a director.³⁰⁶

The article was a survey of the state of Canadian hockey and how that impacted on international hockey. Losing had become a habit for Canada in international competition. Fisher wrote he'd attended the recent world tournament in Stockholm and "I can testify that the Russians (and the Czechs and Swedes) toyed with our team." After outlining the issues facing Hockey Canada he said, "I expect that sporting buffs, in particular, will be surprised at some of the pending developments relating to the national team which I am not now free to divulge." Still Fisher went on to list a number of "tentative projects" at Hockey Canada to make hockey "more widely played and enjoyed."

After the 1972 Canada – Russia series Fisher wrote a long essay in the magazine *International Perspectives*. This magazine was not widely read and was published by the Department for External Affairs. All of Fisher's connections are listed; newspaper columnist, television commentator, author of the task force report, chair of Hockey Canada's executive committee and a former MP. At the end of advisory there was the caveat, "the views expressed in this article are those of the author."³⁰⁷ But what about the details Fisher reported?

Fisher took the reader inside the series and his main character was Alan Eagleson. Fisher had the best access to Eagleson of anyone. Eagleson himself recalls, "We sat

³⁰⁶ Fisher, Douglas, "Hockey Canada", *Commentator*, Volume 13 # 6, June 1969, pg. 8.

³⁰⁷ Fisher, Douglas, "A hockey series that challenged Canadians' view of themselves", *International Perspectives*, Nov/Dec 1972, Ottawa. pg. 13.

together for the four games in Moscow and we shared all the ups and down of our team side by side.”³⁰⁸ Fisher knew the pressure Eagleson was under during the series.

“He called me several times at two and three in the morning just to talk,” says Fisher, “because everybody was dumping on him about how lousy the hockey club was doing...he told me himself he was heading for the meadows. And he was shaking all over all the time.”³⁰⁹

So when Fisher assessed Eagleson’s contribution in the article the participant’s inside position gave him a unique perspective. Fisher said the team called Eagleson “Big Bird”. He wrote, “Metaphorically, he was at the throttle of the series juggernaut; we were passengers, waiting to straighten up the accounts after it was all over.”³¹⁰

But did Fisher, the observer, break confidences? Did he, even writing for an obscure magazine days after the series ended, reveal what happened in the boardroom of Hockey Canada? In the article Fisher noted that, “As a director of Hockey Canada, Mr. Eagleson disagreed with the tentative arrangements it had made to sell the TV rights.” He explained how Eagleson struck out on his own and forced a different television deal on the board. In the planning stages of the series a huge controversy was the eligibility of Bobby Hull to play for the team. Hull had just signed with the new World Hockey League (WHA) and so was not allowed to play in the series because only NHL players were eligible. Lang notes, “For example the Bobby Hull issue and the WHA...he never wrote about it. He had very strong views but he never wrote about it.”³¹¹ Fisher did write about Hull. While it is true that Fisher did not

³⁰⁸ Eagleson email, December 10, 2008.

³⁰⁹ Clayton, Deidre, *Eagle: The Life and Times of R. Alan Eagleson*, (Toronto, Lester & Orpen Denys, 1982) pg. 119.

³¹⁰ Fisher, *International Perspectives*, pg. 18.

³¹¹ Lang interview, May 19, 2009.

clearly state his position on the Hull controversy, he revealed how the board debated the issue.

I knew there would be a hue and cry over the Hull matter if we honoured our understanding with the NHL...Hockey Canada decided after a long internal debate, political interventions from the Prime Minister and strong disagreement from a minority of its directors to go only with NHL players.³¹²

This article walked a very fine line. Ostensibly, it expressed the views of the author, but the participant revealed much of the debate in Hockey Canada leading up to the series and even what happened rink side in Moscow. “I won’t forget Mrs. Eagleson, distraught at her husband’s seizure by the police, screaming at the Russians around us: ‘We’ll never come back to this bloody dictatorship.’”³¹³

A review of Fisher’s *Toronto Sun* columns from Moscow between September 22 and 29, 1972 showed that there was no acknowledgment of Fisher’s role with Hockey Canada. He filed four columns but neither the *Sun* editors or Fisher disclosed the stake he had in the series. It would be Fisher, in his capacity as chair of the executive committee of Hockey Canada, the “author” of the series, who wrote the players on Team Canada after it was all over thanking them for their services and explaining how much they would be paid.³¹⁴

Much that was in these columns was what any columnist might zero in on. Fisher touched on how England, after losing its soccer supremacy, rebuilt its program, about the Canadians who had traveled to Moscow to watch the series and the behavior of the Canadian players on and off the ice. But in each column the participant-observer

³¹² Fisher, *International Perspectives*, pg. 18.

³¹³ *ibid.* pg. 19.

³¹⁴ Hockey Canada Fonds, Fisher letter to Team Canada players, MG 28 I 263, Volume 18, File 300-6-2, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

revealed something that the sports reporter in the press box did not have access to. On September 25 he wrote, “I sat near the ebullient Alan Eagleson, the Team Canada impresario. He was bouncing, shouting, kidding, needling. Very witty, too, including an Akim Tamaroff accent.”³¹⁵ As noted earlier Eagleson said he sat next to Fisher and I would argue that Fisher was, by his own admission, also an impresario for the series. The day before the final game Fisher used a political analogy to predict how Canadian hockey might change because of the series.

It seems to me that two definite though rather formless readjustments will take place in Canada following the USSR-NHL series. The first will be somewhat like what takes place in party politics after one party, particularly one in power, has suffered a stunning electoral reverse. This is attributed to inferior organization and campaigning methods.³¹⁶

Because of his position with Hockey Canada Fisher knew he would have an important voice in those “formless readjustments” but the reader might not have known Fisher’s role in the series and with Hockey Canada. The day after the series Fisher told readers how, just before the game, there was a “last hour crisis over referees, at the ministerial level the Russians put it to our government people that our team’s brutality was so gross that it was useless to talk about another series.”³¹⁷

Fisher’s Moscow columns did not skate as close to the line as the essay in *International Perspectives* where, for example, his take on Eagleson’s role was much more detailed. But each of the columns did give the careful reader an insight that only the Fisher, the participant, could impart.

³¹⁵ *Toronto Sun*, September 25, pg. 9.

³¹⁶ *Toronto Sun*, September 27, pg. 9.

³¹⁷ *Toronto Sun*, September 29, pg. 9.

Was Fisher in a conflict of interest as he shaped Canada's hockey policy and functioned as a journalist? Brian Mulroney says:

Anybody who has had the opportunity to write about government, who's had the opportunity of serving in government, might acquire a bit of a partisan tilt but so what? If he acquires the experience and parliamentary experience of senior bureaucratic ranks or what have you. Knows how government actually functions instead of constantly guessing puts him at a considerable advantage and I always thought Doug had that advantage over many of his contemporaries because of his personal experience.³¹⁸

Another politician, Liberal Herb Gray, says, "To do it the way Fisher did was a mark of respect that people had for him. That people thought he could write and give advice and not be considered too much on one side or the other."³¹⁹

Peter Worthington was editor of the *Toronto Sun* during the Canada-Russia series. Fisher had moved to the *Sun* after the closure of the *Telegram* in 1971. Did Worthington see a conflict in Fisher's participation in policy issues?

Not at all. I think, in fact, it added to what he did for us...Not even a hint of any problem that way. Never raised anything or issue about it. We relied on his judgment, He had good judgment...So I think, on the contrary, we approved and welcomed any other activities he got involved in. He was never conflicted.³²⁰

Tom Kent, was himself an editor and, at the same time, an advisor to the Liberal opposition in the late 1950s. Kent thinks there was a conflict for Fisher being both journalist and advisor to ministers.

I can illustrate that from my own experience. I left journalism essentially because I had become closely involved with a friend of mine, that is to say Mike Pearson, in politics. When I was editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* I'd of course been pretty highly critical of the latter days of the St. Laurent government. When that government had been defeated the more progressive wing of the Liberal party

³¹⁸ Mulroney interview, March 27, 2009.

³¹⁹ Gray interview, April 15, 2009.

³²⁰ Worthington interview, April 28, 2009.

wanted me to be involved in the re-building and I found it really impossible to resist that because of Pearson's personality and it was that that made me feel that I should ease my way out of journalism.³²¹

Kent had a privileged, and undisclosed, access to the Liberal leader and, finally, left an important editorial position. Fisher's role at Hockey Canada was public knowledge. However he too used his privileged access to the world of international hockey in his journalism and no effort was made to disclose his participation to his readers on a regular basis.

Fisher was a regular panelist on the weekly *CTV* program "Question Period." The conflict of interest issue over sport policy was raised on one program and Fisher says it cost him his seat on the panel. Fisher recalled the program with Iona Campagnolo, Minister of Sport, on the November 1, 1977 edition. Fisher was not a panelist on that program.

Bruce [Phillips] was interviewing her and he said something about why would you have Fisher working for you when he's got a salary. She didn't answer that at all. She answered what I could bring to it. That I knew more about sports programming and politicians and parties. Bruce went on to say that I was raking in the money.³²²

Fisher went on to explain that after the taping a technician called him at home to tell him of the exchange. Fisher complained to Phillips, the *CTV* Ottawa bureau chief and host of the program, telling him to, "Kill the show. If it runs you'll regret it." Then Fisher complained to Murray Chercover, the head of *CTV News*.

Chercover phoned me on Saturday. Chercover, as the vice-president, came in riding his big horse. "What's with this thing?" I said, "Well, get rid of it." Well, he said, "It ruins the show." And I said, "I don't

³²¹ Kent interview, April 1, 2009.

³²² Fisher to Hoff, March 17, 2009.

care.” He tried being sweet and then he tried tough stuff. “In other words you’re going to get me blackmailed (from the show).”³²³

Fisher’s determination to go straight to the head of *CTV News* on a Saturday showed that he was very aware of the issue of his integrity as he balanced his participant-observer role. Fisher says his role as a regular on the program ended after this run-in with Chercover.³²⁴

Phillips doesn’t recall the specifics of this incident more than 30 years ago.

I did raise a question with him once, or I might have said something for publication once in connection I think with Hockey Canada, the details which now elude me. And Doug did take umbrage with that. He said what the hell are you talking about. I said well Doug if you are offended I said I have a little trouble here but that was the only occasion. In my view people have a right to know about other activities if they have a bearing on what is expressed, absolutely.³²⁵

Phillips says that at no time during his tenure at “Question Period” did Chercover ever discuss any editorial or panel issues with him about the program. Phillips says Fisher’s role as a regular panelist ended because he wanted to diversify the panel and move away from having the same three panelists every week.

Phillips is clear that he was never concerned about Fisher’s ethics.

I don’t disagree with you about the principle involved here but I am not sure that Doug has ever done anything other than express his own view independently reached and nobody owned Doug Fisher. Absolutely not.³²⁶

Phillips then turned to the realities of journalism, something he knows well from years of providing commentaries for *CTV*. “I don’t think a guy could sit down, write a

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Phillips, Bruce, interview with the author, March 20, 2009.

³²⁶ Ibid.

column, and then have a proviso at the bottom saying I'm a friend of Iona Campagnolo, I'm a friend of Pearson, you know, we'd all be out of business."³²⁷

Columnist – Television Interviewer

The format of "Question Period" was simple; one guest, usually a politician but occasionally a senior bureaucrat, with a panel of three journalists and a moderator. There was minimal preparation for the show that was produced on a shoestring. "Bain and I tried to work together. George and I would sketch a couple of ideas or what...I'll follow you and you follow me."³²⁸

Fisher appeared on hundreds of the programs. One that illustrated his style was an appearance by Prime Minister Trudeau on March 31, 1974. Trudeau had appeared on "Question Period" on May 25, 1969 but Fisher was not a panelist on that program. George Bain, who was on the program, explained what happened in a column a few months later.

Doug Fisher is not one of Pierre Trudeau's favorite people. On one occasion, when the Prime Minister had consented to appear on a television program to be questioned by four newsmen, Fisher, who had been a fairly regular member of the panel, was dropped. Inquiry produced the answer that the PM's office had made it a condition.³²⁹

After that Fisher did appear on at least two editions of "Question Period" to question Trudeau. In a column about Trudeau, Bain reported on an exchange between Fisher

³²⁷ *ibid.*

³²⁸ Fisher interview, November 23, 2008.

³²⁹ Bain, George, *Globe and Mail*, January 22, 1970, pg. 6.

and Trudeau that happened off camera. A few days before the taping Trudeau had spoken to students in Ottawa.

He hoped the voters would judge the Government on its policies, not on whether he had ever done a day's work in his life, or on the length of his hair.

Two days later, in a studio at CJOH before the taping of the CTV program Question Period which ran on March 19, Douglas Fisher twitted the Prime Minister about reaching for so obvious a button – the students' feelings about freedom in hair-styles – to trigger a favorable response among them.³³⁰

The edition of "Question Period" on March 31, 1974, however illustrated how Fisher "twitted" Trudeau on-air as well. The program aired the week after a federal – provincial meeting on Canadian oil prices. Here is the first exchange between Fisher and Trudeau.

Fisher: When you distributed sheets of paper to the premiers the other day...

Trudeau: (off camera) Who told you that? (short laugh)

Fisher: (continues as if he hasn't heard Trudeau) ...and asked them to put a price on oil what did you really expect to get from them in terms of a range?

Trudeau: (pauses and sighs audibly) Well, now, you are asking me to comment on something that went on at a private meeting. I'd ahh...

Fisher: Well it intrigues me because it seem either terribly ingenious or terribly ingenuous that if you begin a meeting by asking the premiers to put down on a piece of paper what they think the price of oil should be it almost looks to me as though you didn't really know what was coming.

Trudeau: Remember your classical economics. Walras, the great economist, when he was trying to explain the market system. How is price arrived at in the first place?

Fisher: (big smile on his face, laughs) I love that question.

Trudeau: Someone yells out a price. And if there are takers someone else will yell out a lower price. Yelling prices around and finally they arrive at something. It just struck me that this might be a technique. Prices yelled out by chance to see if there was some kind of range in which we could negotiate.

Fisher: Well, I understand the range was between 4 and 8. What did you put on your slip of paper? What was your price?

³³⁰ Bain, George, *Globe and Mail*, April 4, 1972, pg. 6.

Trudeau: Well...let me say your information on this is inexact. It wasn't between 4 and 8 but don't ask me what it was.

Fisher: Well, I guess one of the premiers had it wrong.

Trudeau: Well, perhaps he didn't see the slip of paper.

(Both Fisher and Trudeau laugh.)

Charles Lynch: It sounds like a better conference than you had on television. Why didn't you let us in to see this?

Fisher: It sounds like a parlour game.³³¹

Throughout the exchange Fisher spoke quietly. He gave no indication that he knew he had surprised Trudeau with his line of questioning. He forced Trudeau to concede that he had, in fact, used the ploy with the slips of paper. It also showed that Trudeau and Fisher were happy to discuss an obscure economist and economic theory on national television. Fisher was up to the challenge of taking on Trudeau and doing the homework required. The scoop, Fisher now says, did come from a premier, Duff Roblin of Manitoba.

The *CTV* program "Question Period" was just one, all be it an important one, of the television programs Fisher appeared on. Even before he entered politics Fisher understood that television was a powerful medium about to change politics. Using it was a key to his first election win in 1957 and, as a member of the broadcasting committee in parliament, Fisher heard the testimony, and got to know, all of the various personalities and factions in Canada's broadcast industry. He actively sought to inform himself about television and looked for ways to get exposure on television. The CCF and NDP used Fisher as one of the presenters of their "free time political broadcasts" and a key reason Fisher opted to write for the *Telegram* was the side deal with John Bassett giving Fisher a weekly television show on Bassett's new station, *CFTO*, in Toronto.

³³¹ *CTV News*, "Question Period," March 31, 1974, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

CFTO's first broadcast was on December 31, 1960 and since archival copies of Fisher's work at *CFTO* do not exist³³² a review of television listings is one way to piece together his work. One of Fisher's first appearances was May 13, 1962. An advertisement in the *Toronto Star* read "CTV Network presents INTERVIEW with John Bassett (PC candidate Spadina) and Douglas Fisher at 7 pm on Channel 9."³³³ There was one additional line of copy to promote the one-hour program: "Douglas Fisher, M.P., the outspoken Member of Parliament interviews John Bassett." Bassett had been nominated as the Conservative candidate for the Toronto riding of Spadina for upcoming 1962 federal election.

In an undated interview in the mid-1970s Fisher said, "I had a program for three years at *CFTO* in 1962, '63, '64. A half hour program every week where I chatted with politicians."³³⁴ He told me the same thing. But I have not found a television listing for the program. There is a listing for a Fisher program starting on March 22, 1964 for what appears to be his weekly series that was called "Doug Fisher and...". Initially the program aired at various times on Sundays on *CFTO* but settled in at 11:40 p.m. It also aired in Ottawa on *CJOH* at 11:35. It was a half-hour interview program featuring an interview with a prominent politician. Murray Chercover was the head of the fledgling *CTV* network and he talked Fisher into that Sunday night slot. Fisher says,

He said, "Look we are going to put you in a very quiet time." and he said, "You are going to think you are not getting reaction at all but you will be. You'll be surprised by the numbers." In all those years from

³³² Note: *CFTO* has kept none of Fisher's television programs.

³³³ *Toronto Star*, May 12, 1962, pg. 31.

³³⁴ Bullis, Robert, *Meet the Media*, (circa 1976) Carleton University Library, pg. 146.

'62 to '92, at that time slot, after the late night news, we held by a big margin.³³⁵

Fisher also appeared as a news commentator on *CJOH* in Ottawa. Max Keeping joined *CTV* as a reporter in Ottawa in 1966. He says Lynch, Fisher and Montreal columnist Bill Wilson were hired as “a trio of great knowledge to be part of the *CJOH* empire.”³³⁶ *CJOH* was a new private station in Ottawa and Fisher and the others gave its newscast instant credibility against *CBOT*, the *CBC* station in Ottawa, anchored by Patrick Watson and Laurier LaPierre.

The other television work that gave Fisher a profile across the country was *CTV* during live political specials. Fisher was a floor reporter during live coverage at the beginning of a Liberal Party policy conference in Ottawa in October 1966. Fisher worked with *CTV* reporter Ab Douglas. In one of the few excerpts of Fisher in the *CTV* archives he is seen interviewing Prime Minister Pearson about the conference suggesting it was “a bit daring.”³³⁷ Pearson replied Fisher should ask him at the end of the conference if it was daring. Fisher also interviewed a provincial Liberal from British Columbia and asked him “Is the west down here loaded for bear Mr. McGreer?” Fisher’s relaxed style of questioning continued when he brought a Mrs. Underhill to the camera noting that “there are a lot of women here. I counted three mink stoles.” He then asked Mrs. Underhill, from London, Ontario, what issues women would be raising. Fisher and Douglas traded guests handing the interview duties back and forth. Fisher jumped in at the end of Douglas’ interview with the Minister of Defense, Paul Hellyer, and asked Hellyer if he was interested in running

³³⁵ Fisher interview, November 9, 2008.

³³⁶ Keeping, Max, interview with the author, April 15, 2009.

³³⁷ *CTV* Archives, courtesy Robert Hurst, Vice President *CTV* News, Toronto.

for leader of the Liberals. Another *CTV* archive excerpt has the anchor of an unidentified program introduce Fisher interviewing the Minister for External Affairs, Paul Martin, Sr., about Canada's diplomatic role in Vietnam. The interview touches on Canadian diplomat, Chester Ronning's assignment to Hanoi in 1966 to look for a diplomatic solution to the Vietnam war. Fisher pressed Martin about Canadians calling on the government to "take a moral position" on Vietnam. After Martin repeated that Canada was seeking a way to bring both sides to the peace table Fisher came back again to remind Martin that President Johnson had recently warned the Vietnam war would not end soon. Martin then conceded that Canada's achievements "have to date been minimal but I remain an optimist."

At the 1967 Conservative leadership convention and again at the 1968 Liberal leadership convention Fisher was a floor reporter and commentator. Henry Champ, who went on to a long career as a television correspondent for *CTV*, *NBC* and later at *CBC*, was a young reporter assigned by *CTV* to both conventions. He recalls that Fisher was placed on the floor along with Pierre Berton to give their take as the convention progressed. Champ and the other reporters were sent to Fisher or Berton and gave up their microphones for these segments. He says Fisher didn't care much for television but he "was interested in telling people on television what he thought about things."³³⁸

Fisher says the television work "gave me power" in Ottawa³³⁹. He says, "It was very useful, that television, as an entrée in Ottawa. There were always people to go on...again that opened up connections."³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Champ, Henry, (telephone interview) interview with the author, July 16, 2009.
³³⁹ Fisher interview, November 9, 2008.

Mulrone appeared on Question Period with Fisher as one of the panelists and on Fisher's program.

He was never insolent or pretentious as some of them were. Trying to prove their virility by being impolite at all times. He was never like that. He developed strong opinions, pro and con, and would put them in this column. If you were his guest on a program he treated you very fairly.³⁴¹

Max Keeping says the program was all Fisher. "He did it himself. He arranged the guests. Those were wonderful conversations in a political town."³⁴² Keeping doesn't give Fisher high marks for television presence. "Doug wasn't ponderous but he certainly wasn't coming through the television set...Doug isn't great television but Doug was very good television because what he had to say, and he could say it succinctly."³⁴³

Jeffrey Simpson appeared on Fisher's program after he became the *Globe's* Ottawa columnist in 1984.

There were a couple of guests and there was Doug and you would discuss two or three events of the week. That was pretty much it. Doug would both ask questions and have opinions so he was more than simply an animator. And it was a very modest show. It was about as low budget as you could possibly be. He was in charge. He would ring up and say, "Can you be on my show on Friday?" It was taped on Fridays. It seemed to me to have a small but rather faithful audience of the kind of people that you would expect to be watching television about politics and public issues. He was a kind of unlikely television fixture because, you know, he doesn't dress the part. He always looked a bit like a walking unmade bed."³⁴⁴

In the mid-1970s the program was called "Confidential Canada" and Fisher described the program this way.

³⁴⁰ Fisher interview, December 6, 2008.

³⁴¹ Mulrone interview, March 27, 2009.

³⁴² Keeping interview, April 15, 2009.

³⁴³ *ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Simpson, Jeffrey, interview with the author, March 24, 2009.

It's somewhere between an interview show and these kind of panel things that you have, but essentially it's only as good as what (my guests) and I have to bring to it. It doesn't depend on anybody else so if you don't get an audience or playback, then you really bombed and you can't put the blame on anyone else.³⁴⁵

Fisher worked on other programs as well. In 1977 he co-hosted a weekly program, "Hourlong," that ran in prime time on Monday nights in Toronto, Kitchener and Ottawa. When it debuted on October 10, 1977 the *Globe and Mail* reported. "Tonight at 10:00 p.m. stations in Toronto and Ottawa will offer something that is so novel it's almost startling: a weekly Ontario public affairs show that comes not from the *CBC* or even from *CTV*, but from two individual stations, *CFTO* and *CJOH*."³⁴⁶ After that he produced a weekly program on politics for *CJOH*. Nancy Wilson, now a news anchor at *CBC Newsworld*, recalled one item on the first edition of that program called, "House on the Hill."

Doug said, "you know there is a Newfoundlander in the House of Commons and I've been reading Hansard and I've been watching him." By then TV had arrived. "And I think we have to take notice of this fellow. His name is John Crosbie." So we did a profile on John Crosbie.³⁴⁷

For Fisher television was both a way to supplement his income and increase his impact as a commentator. As Canadians, starting in the 1960s, began to put down their newspapers and turn on their televisions for news Fisher was there as a commentator, interviewer and host. It gave him a cachet with both politicians and his colleagues in the press gallery. Senator Mike Duffy was a young reporter in Ottawa and he watched how *CJOH* used the columnists.

³⁴⁵ Bullis, pg. 146.

³⁴⁶ *Globe and Mail*, October 10, 1977, pg. 14.

³⁴⁷ Wilson interview, April 27, 2009.

They would come in and one night it would be Fisher, one night it would be Bain and Charlie (Lynch) on things like elections. They were big stars in their day, especially in this town where the MPs would watch the local news, as giants...media giants.³⁴⁸

Fisher filed two-minute commentaries for *CJOH* until the late 1980s. Keeping explained how Fisher was used. “It was part of our reporting. Here’s the story of what happened on the Hill today. Here’s Doug Fisher to give us the context for it and what he thinks.” So, how did *CJOH* introduce Fisher?

We quite often said “former member of parliament.” Did we say, “former NDP member of parliament?” On occasion. But there was no set rule to set this guy up. You set him up for what he is. He is a man with parliamentary experience. He is a former MP now a columnist. We didn’t say that all the time.³⁴⁹

In the 1980s Fisher had become the “dean of the press gallery” and a feature on the Ottawa press gallery in Saturday Night in 1985 by his old colleague George Bain was far more respectful than Jack Batten’s take 17 years earlier. Bain wrote, “Although the *Toronto Sun* is not on all the must-read lists in Cabinet offices, MP’s offices and government offices, Doug Fisher’s column is sought out by parliamentarians because he reads, asks questions, know the place - he’s a former M.P - and is all-round solid.”³⁵⁰

By 1990 Fisher had cut back to three columns a week running on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. His regular television work was winding down – and the weekly Sunday night Fisher program ended in 1992. That year was also the year that Canada’s decade of constitutional debate came to an end with the Charlottetown referendum.

³⁴⁸ Duffy interview, March 12, 2009.

³⁴⁹ Keeping interview, April 15, 2009.

³⁵⁰ Bain, George, “Dateline Ottawa,” *Saturday Night*, July 1985, pg. 29.

Columnist – Meech Lake Accord

Fisher had opined and covered Canada's constitutional issues throughout his career. The issue of how to accommodate Quebec in Confederation had won him enemies as an MP. He has always been remembered for his statements on Quebec culture at the Laval conference in 1961. Graham Fraser says of Quebec, Fisher "reflected the widely held view to quit your bitching. That was a strongly felt view in large parts of English Canada."³⁵¹

Fisher's own account of his first informal meeting with Trudeau supports this. They found themselves in the steam bath on Parliament Hill.

I realized this was the new find from Montreal, Trudeau. So I introduced myself and he introduced himself. We sat there. In five minutes he was into an argument about the constitution. Well I always...a technique that, I don't know where it came from...I have always felt that the best thing to do when you're in an argument is to change the subject almost immediately, and then rip along, which I did and it got him angry as hell. I said there is no use talking to you. Your coming at this as a lawyer and I said this is politics and politics is history and you are not going to decide the fate of Canada with lawyers. There is a country out there and people who have feelings. I meant that very seriously.³⁵²

So, in 1990, how did Fisher report the final days of negotiations on the Meech Lake Accord? How did his reporting compare to the political columnists in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*? Federal – provincial negotiations to amend the constitution in

³⁵¹ Fraser interview, March 6, 2009.

³⁵² Fisher interview, March 10, 2009.

1987 resulted in what became known as the Meech Lake Accord. In 1982 Quebec refused to sign the constitution. The Accord was an initiative to get all provinces and the federal government to agree to a constitutional process that would include Quebec. The federal government and the provinces then had three years to ratify it in the Canada's legislatures. In June 1990, with the deadline approaching last minute meetings and negotiations failed to save it. Most provinces found ways to pass the Accord but the governments of Newfoundland and Manitoba refused to meet the deadline.

It is important to note Fisher, ever the participant, took a stand on Meech. He did this in January 1990 when he signed a letter in support of Meech. The letter was signed by a number of former Trudeau cabinet ministers and Gordon Robertson, the former clerk of the Privy Council, spoke for the group when he appeared at the news conference making the letter public. Amongst those signing were two journalists, Fisher and Bruce Hutchison. The letter stated, "We believe that the accord reflects the reality of Canada, and that if accepted, it will contribute to building trust, understanding and harmony within the Canadian federation."³⁵³

As with the review of the 1968 election, I will start with the *Globe and Mail* coverage and then the *Toronto Star* before reviewing Fisher's work. The review will cover June 4 to 7 and June 13 to 30.

In 1990 the lead columnist for the *Globe and Mail* was Jeffrey Simpson. His column usually appeared under the lead editorial. Simpson wrote 16 columns over

³⁵³ *Globe and Mail*, January 23, 1990, pg. 12.

the 21 days surveyed. All but one mentioned Meech.³⁵⁴ Simpson wrote carefully and fully about the accord. On June 5, the eve of the last minute first ministers' conference to try to save the deal, Simpson summed up the situation.

Meech Lake was an ephemeral triumph of so-called executive federalism, when the accord was negotiated, and for a brief time thereafter, it appeared Meech would pass. Then public antipathy made itself felt, first in cold political terms in New Brunswick, then in Manitoba, and finally in Newfoundland, although all premiers felt the heat of public opposition.

Public debate, shattered what executive federalism had wrought. Now, after extensive public debate and new hearings by a Commons committee, executive federalism in the form of this week's dramatic first ministers' conference is trying to stitch together what the past two years have torn apart.³⁵⁵

Over the next three weeks Simpson reviewed the politics of the collapsing agreement. The Liberal party elected Jean Chretien leader during this period, choosing him on the day Meech failed, June 23, and Simpson wrote about Chretien's unwillingness to take a stand on Meech while acknowledging that Chretien was "in a tight corner." Simpson went to Calgary for the Liberal leadership convention and five of the columns assessed the impact of the failure of Meech on the Liberals and Chretien. Simpson also wrote about the impact on Quebec. He predicted, "The death of Meech Lake would drive (Quebec Premier) Mr. Bourassa into a far more nationalist position."³⁵⁶ He wrote that Lucien Bouchard, after quitting the Conservative cabinet over Meech, was "waiting for the call. Just when and how it will come remains unclear, but there can be no doubt he expects it."³⁵⁷ Simpson called Meech "a

³⁵⁴ Note: Robert Sheppard wrote ten columns on Meech during this period for the *Globe and Mail*. His column was called "The Provinces."

³⁵⁵ Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, June 4, 1990, pg. 6.

³⁵⁶ Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, June 27, pg. 14.

³⁵⁷ Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, June 15, 1990, pg. 6.

national psychodrama” and wrote, “Canada without Meech would not be the Canada before Meech.”³⁵⁸

Simpson’s analysis was even-handed. For the most part he went beyond the minute-by-minute developments instead gauging and predicting the reaction in all parts of the country from British Columbia to Newfoundland but always with a strong focus on the implications for Quebec and for Canadian federalism.

The Toronto Star’s national affairs columnist was Carol Goar. Over the period reviewed Goar filed 11 columns and ten referenced Meech.³⁵⁹ On four days the Star opted to put her analysis piece on page one and Goar was given many more column inches than Simpson. As with Simpson the Liberal convention appeared to result in Goar giving Chretien and the Liberals position more space than the Conservative position. Three of the columns focused on Chretien and the Liberal party as well as Meech. Like Simpson, Goar devoted one column to Senate reform and like Simpson called the issue “a pure power struggle.”³⁶⁰ Goar also explored the motives of Chretien as he moved from an opponent of Meech to a supporter and then falling silent on the issue in the critical final days. “So Chretien is caught between his convictions and political reality.”³⁶¹

A theme of Goar’s coverage was the need for political leadership. At various times she was critical of the leadership of Chretien, Mulroney and provincial premiers. Her column on June 20 summed this up.

³⁵⁸ Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, June 28, 1990, pg. 6.

³⁵⁹ Note: Thomas Walkom, the *Star*’s Queen’s park columnist, wrote five columns on Meech during this period.

³⁶⁰ Goar, Carol, *Toronto Star*, June 7, pg. 23.

³⁶¹ Goar, *Toronto Star*, June 16, pg. D1

This would require a degree of statesmanship that we have not yet seen in the Meech Lake debate. The nation's leaders would have to move from the level of procedural tactics to the level of personal courage.³⁶²

Goar did not come out for or against Meech. She expressed concern about the impact of the failure of Meech on Canada but without Simpson's dire warnings. For Goar the end of Meech left a "legacy of acrimony and mistrust that will live on."³⁶³ Like Simpson, she concluded the method of executive federalism resulted in a "refusal to listen to criticism or alter their course."³⁶⁴ Goar recognized the possibility of a new federal party in Quebec advocating separatism and saw it as a "testament to Mulroney's failure to achieve national reconciliation."³⁶⁵

However Goar pointed out that the Liberal position on Meech meant Chretien received none "of the small pleasures of victory" and that in Quebec Chretien "was denounced as a traitor."³⁶⁶

Goar's analysis covered much of the same territory as Simpson but with less emphasis on the various provincial perspectives and a greater focus on the political leaders. On June 30, the day before Canada Day, Goar's final paragraph hinted that she felt something had been lost in the defeat of Meech.

Perhaps we need to shrug off our understated patriotism. Perhaps we need to seek men and women who epitomize what we value about Canada, and urge them to enter public life. Perhaps we need to grieve a little for the Meech Lake accord – not the piece of paper, but the lost opportunity.³⁶⁷

³⁶² Goar, *Toronto Star*, June 20, 2009, pg. 1.

³⁶³ Goar, *Toronto Star*, June 23, 2009, pg. 1.

³⁶⁴ *ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Goar, *Toronto Star*, June 30, 2009, D4.

³⁶⁶ *ibid.*

³⁶⁷ *ibid.*

In the *Toronto Sun* Doug Fisher wrote ten columns during this period. Nine of the columns made reference to the accord in some way. Fisher was the first of the three columnists to take on the issue of the Senate. He conceded that the issue of a reformed Senate would be a key to the last minute Meech negotiations. He wrote, “It is gross that Meech pivots on something so irrational.”³⁶⁸ However the bulk of the column was a review of the failures of the Senate as a Canadian political institution and his opinion that “a reformed Senate just offers more negativism, and a similar amount of talk to be ignored.”³⁶⁹

On June 6, while the first ministers were meeting to try and hammer out a deal, Fisher wrote a column called “Real life on Meech Lake.” The column opened with a reference to the meeting on the Accord but then veered off to a description of Meech Lake. Fisher summered on Meech Lake and knew it well but looking back the column seems out of place and out of character for Fisher who rarely dealt with matters about his personal life. Fisher did place his cottage in relation to the turn off to the Prime Minister’s residence at Harrington Lake. Fisher didn’t reveal that on occasion he made the 100 metre walk up to the gates for a visit with the Mulroneys. On June 15 Fisher devoted a column to the *CBC*’s coverage of the political machinations around the accord.³⁷⁰ The *CBC* all-news channel, Newsworld, was a year old and Fisher noted the channel “has married the omnipresence to omniscience, and *CBC-TV* news has jumped far ahead of any metropolitan daily or the Canadian

³⁶⁸ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 4, 1990, pg. 11.

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*

³⁷⁰ Note: The author was a senior producer at *CBC News* during this period and worked closely with the Ottawa Bureau on the coverage.

Press.”³⁷¹ Simpson ignored the impact of television but two weeks after Fisher column Carol Goar made much the same point in her piece on the lessons from Meech. “The CBC’s all-news channel has changed the dynamics of Canadian politics irrevocably.” Goar zeroed in on the real impact, “For those in power it was a glaring illustration that there is no room for sloppiness in an era of instant information.”³⁷² Fisher also gave one column over to the grievances of the aboriginal communities in Canada and their demands around Meech. As with his piece on the Senate Fisher opened up the discussion to a broader think piece on what kind of aboriginal self-government was needed.³⁷³

His three columns the week after Meech died were about the impact on Canada. On June 25 he cautioned that Canada’s leaders couldn’t simply leave Meech behind. Like Simpson and Goar, Fisher believed the process had created fundamental shifts. “Too many forces are now in play. There are too many immediate imperatives for the prime minister and the premier of Quebec and even for Jean Chretien, the new leader of the Liberals.”³⁷⁴ This column focused on the “urgent” need for “quick, sensible responses to Quebec’s sudden freedom.” The next two columns, June 27 and 29, focused more on the view from English Canada. In the first, Fisher again referenced *CBC*’s coverage but this time he reported on the appearances of three English Canadian historians (Michael Bliss, David Bercuson and Jack Granatstein) who gave their take on the consequences of Meech.

Granatstein was affably reasonable in suggesting that now English Canadians could create what they have been blocked from for so long

³⁷¹ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 15, 1990, pg. 11.

³⁷² Goar, *Toronto Star*, June 28, pg. 23.

³⁷³ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 18, 1990, pg. 11

³⁷⁴ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 25, 1990, pg. 11.

by Quebec's demands and needs – a powerful central government for an English-speaking Canada!³⁷⁵

Two days later Fisher wrote, “In short, we ought to get busy on Canada, as the Quebecois are determining the system for their precious autonomy.”³⁷⁶ Simpson and Goar also speculated on the meaning of the failure for Canada but Fisher saw it more starkly and took the side of English Canada.

Today federal Canada has two national parties. The head of one, the PM, represents a Quebec riding. The other intends to. Each is in a political scenario that really closed when Meech failed and the Quebecois at once began their transit to a new state. The transition must be ours as well as their. Do we stand by while they debate, refine and inaugurate their new system of government!³⁷⁷

On balance Fisher's contributions about Meech represented the view from and about English Canada. His decision to try to accommodate Meech in January was clearly challenged by events. Fisher says he did support Meech and argues, “I always felt the main reason it was allowed to drag. We had a couple of premiers who didn't know their ass from a hole in the ground.”³⁷⁸

These columns, from this period, also illustrated how Fisher had moved to a more conservative position over time. He himself acknowledges that he became “a populist...a conservative populist,”³⁷⁹ and the Meech columns, particularly the last three, confirmed that. Meech showed Fisher, now over 70, more focused on his observer role. However of the columnists reviewed only Fisher, ever the participant, took a public position on Meech. While Fisher wrote extensively on Meech he stuck to his regular columns. He wrote the fewest columns and while Simpson and Goar got

³⁷⁵ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 27, 1990, pg. 11.

³⁷⁶ Fisher, *Toronto Sun*, June 29, pg. 11.

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*

³⁷⁸ Fisher interview, March 10, 2009.

³⁷⁹ Fisher interview, March 15, 2009.

more play in their newspapers Fisher's editors did not give him additional space. The final days of Meech saw round the clock negotiations seven days a week but none of that resulted in a larger, timelier Fisher presence in the *Sun*.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

In 1990 after Lucien Bouchard resigned from the Mulroney cabinet he began to write a column in *Le Devoir*. Jeffrey Simpson at the *Globe and Mail* commented.

You have to scratch your head and think hard about another serious paper willing to give a weekly soapbox to a sitting MP. It would as strange as the *Globe and Mail* hiring Michael Wilson or Herb Gray to write a weekly column.³⁸⁰

Thirty years earlier the *Toronto Telegram*, certainly a serious paper of the time, did just that. Douglas Fisher brought his audience, in print and then television, a unique perspective on politics. Time and again he explained and illuminated the political process. Fisher loved the game of politics and had an enormous respect for the place of parliament in the political process. He used his columns to rate the parties, the leaders and the backbenchers that make the laws of Canada. Fisher described to Tom Earle in 1993 the satisfaction he drew from journalism.

I suppose just what it enables you to do in keeping your mind and your imagination alive about what's happening and what's going on in politics. The greatest satisfaction, and this is very egocentric, is feeling

³⁸⁰ Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, June 15, 1990, pg. 14.

that you have some understanding for what's happening to your country.³⁸¹

Politicians acknowledge Fisher's "understanding" had an impact.

The former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who counts Fisher as a friend, says.

There are no others who have done it like him. So it is not a loss or a gain. We gained when he came and we lost when he left. I don't know of any other member of parliament who has been writing about parliament and public affairs as he has done for a second career. The inside knowledge and an understanding of the functioning of political parties in parliament better than anybody from the outside.³⁸²

The former Conservative Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney has known Fisher throughout his adult life.

He was comfortable in his skin that he didn't give a damn about changing mores or social rules of the journalist and so on. If he had a certain view, either for or against the Mulroney government, he published it. And if in the process of publishing a couple of columns happened to be supportive of the government he was accused of being a friend of the prime minister he didn't give a damn. He was strong enough on his own to not worry about trivia like that.³⁸³

Herb Gray sat in Parliament with Fisher, then later in their careers, sat across from him answering Fisher's questions. Gray said Fisher never forgot the MP's perspective.

His writings were informed by his hands on experience. Also the years he was based in Ottawa he had a lot of people he talked to. He called or maybe who called him. That's the other side. He was respected as a fair-minded person. Some people wrote columns that was all from one, not just partisan, but from one approach, not understanding or respecting what it was like to be a member, It was a unique combination of challenges and pressures.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ Fisher interview with Earle, September 13, 1993, pg. 176.

³⁸² Chretien interview, May 19, 2009.

³⁸³ Mulroney interview, March 27, 2009.

³⁸⁴ Gray interview, April 15, 2009.

Gray and Mulroney agree Fisher's influence extended into the caucus of both the Liberals and Conservatives. Gray noted that Fisher "was one of the people who the caucus read and when they opened the paper they went to Fisher's column. It had an impact with respect to public opinion and inside the Queensway."³⁸⁵

Mulroney said Fisher,

...had a following in the Conservative caucus. He was held in high regard by a large number of Conservative members of parliament and senators. Strangely I think they felt on some important issues an ideological kinship with him although he had been elected as a CCFer. But he was western in thought.³⁸⁶

Some of those caucus members on both sides of the aisle also wrote about Fisher's influence. On the Conservative side John Crosbie, who served in Mulroney's cabinet, wrote, "Douglas Fisher, the political columnist for the *Sun* newspapers, was the best informed, most impartial journalist in Ottawa."³⁸⁷ Eugene Whelan, a Liberal, recalled Fisher was the "fairest and most knowledgeable" member of the press gallery. "Doug can be tough, but I always read his column because it's usually pretty accurate; just once in a while he'd get nasty and I'd have to call him up and tell him what I thought."³⁸⁸

Journalists have also remarked on Fisher's influence. George Bain and Peter Newman worked beside Fisher in the 1960s. Bain said Fisher was "Ottawa's best-informed commentator on Parliament."³⁸⁹ Newman said Fisher was "one of the most thoughtful Ottawa journalists."³⁹⁰

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Mulroney interview, March 27, 2009.

³⁸⁷ Crosbie, John, *No Holds Barred*, (Toronto, McLelland and Stewart, 1997) pg. 302.

³⁸⁸ Whelan, Eugene, *The Man in the Green Stetson*, (Toronto, Irwin Publishing, 1986), pg. 138.

³⁸⁹ Bain, George, *Gotcha*, pg. 8.

³⁹⁰ Newman, Peter, *The Canadian Revolution – 1985-1995*, (Toronto, Viking Press, 1995) pg. 260.

In 1971 the journalist and author Walter Stewart wrote.

Another name to be reckoned with, although he is not nearly as admired, is the Telegram's Douglas Fisher. Fisher's success, as I see it, comes not so much from his shrewd analysis (as a former MP and a major figure in the CCF, he knows much more than most of us about how politics work), as from the refreshing fact that he has something to say and says it well.³⁹¹

Another contemporary, Allan Fotheringham, didn't agree with Stewart about Fisher's writing style. "Fisher wouldn't know a leader if he found one in his soup...Fisher's column in the Toronto Sun could be improved 50 per cent with ten minutes work with a strong pencil." However Fotheringham read Fisher. "If you must know, the most useful Ottawa columnist to a reader is Doug Fisher, a large baleful man who (for some strange reason that has always puzzled me) does not like me."³⁹² Peter Worthington, Fisher's first editor at the *Toronto Sun*, concurs with Fotheringham on both points. He says Fisher "was a curious kind of columnist because sometimes the essence of what he wanted to say was in the middle or the bottom of his column. But he always had a viewpoint that was somewhat different from the conventional one. It was really important to the paper."³⁹³

Political journalists in Ottawa today are no less respectful of Fisher. Chantal Hebert is the national affairs columnist for the *Toronto Star*. She credited part of his influence with politicians on the fact that he had been a participant.

I mean people don't have to speak out of school to tell you about a leader's approach to issues versus someone else. But there are limits to that and if you are a former politician, and on that Fisher is not unique...I mean I watch Jean LaPierre operate here in Quebec...Former politicians will be told things by other politicians that journalists won't. Part of that reason is if you are a former

³⁹¹ Stewart, Walter, *Shrug*, (Toronto, New Press, 1971) pg. 213.

³⁹² Fotheringham, Allan, *Birds of a Feather*, (Toronto, Key Porter Books, 1989) pg. 167-68.

³⁹³ Worthington interview, April 28, 2009.

politician you are not crossing a line. Yes, you've crossed a line by becoming a columnist but not by having inside information or having some rather intricate networks within given federal parties.³⁹⁴

Robert Fife, now the *CTV* Bureau Chief, says.

Really, you had to read Doug Fisher's column...you just had to. It's funny because he wrote for the *Sun* and he should have been really in the *Globe and Mail*. His stuff was so insightful...He knew more about parliament than any journalist working on Parliament Hill. He read Hansard every single day. Nobody was doing that! I mean we go for Question Period, that's it. He read the whole friggin' thing!³⁹⁵

Jeffrey Simpson has been the Ottawa columnist for the *Globe and Mail* for 25 years.

One of the things that he uniquely, of all the columnists of my time and before my time, he was very interested in individual members of parliament and in the institution of parliament. Which I am sure came from the fact that he was once a member of parliament. He was a backbencher and I think therefore he had a life long affinity for the backbench members of parliament and for what went on in the precincts of the House of Commons and committee. He would read Hansard, which the rest of us did not do. He would have coffee over in the cafeteria, in the West Block, with clusters of MP. I don't know how many were his sources but they seemed to be a variety of parties. And he liked them in terms of respecting them as MPs and they liked him.³⁹⁶

As can be seen in many of the comments about Fisher there is an implicit understanding of his role as a participant and an observer. His peers valued his experience campaigning for office, his years on the opposition bench and his awareness of what was possible in the game of politics. His direct involvement as a participant with government bureaucracy, for example Hockey Canada, gave Fisher an inside knowledge of government decision-making. He lobbied the government for support on sports issues, not as a journalist with an axe to grind, but as the chair of

³⁹⁴ Hebert, Chantal, interview with the author, March 16, 2009.

³⁹⁵ Fife, Robert, interview July 20, 2009.

³⁹⁶ Simpson interview, April 24, 2009. Note: I have presented only a small sample of opinions on Fisher. Many others have written about his influence. Every politician and journalist I approached for an interview responded quickly and all agreed to talk about Fisher.

Hockey Canada. As a participant he knew how the political process led to power and created policy.

As a journalist he read Hansard and government reports other journalists ignored. He talked to everybody as Fife says, “He talked to people in the Senate. He talked to the ‘outs’ and he talked to the ‘ins’. So when the ‘outs’ came in they knew Doug and when the ‘ins’ were out he kept watching them.”³⁹⁷ Fisher always shared his institutional memory with his audience. Day after day his columns put a current political happening in context for Canadians. Nancy Wilson, who worked with Fisher in the late 1970s, says he did that for journalists too. “If you weren’t sure of something or you wanted to know the history of something go and talk to Doug. And the thing is that he wouldn’t just rattle off something and fill in the blanks he would explain the deep background.”³⁹⁸

Could Fisher serve two masters? Could he be a participant, as a politician-journalist or as a lobbyist-journalist, and report fairly on the political happenings in Canada? First it is important to remember that Fisher was always a columnist. Much has been written about journalism ethics and conflict of interest. Nick Russell in *Morals and the Media* stated, “The journalist needs to clarify whether outside work is acceptable before he does it. And it is advisable to publicly declare any possible conflict.”³⁹⁹ Russell was writing about staff reporters. Fisher considered himself a freelancer and a columnist. Russell warned, “Freelance work can also threaten the integrity of the reporter himself.”⁴⁰⁰ Again, the caveat here is that Russell does not explore the role

³⁹⁷ Fife interview, July 20, 2009.

³⁹⁸ Wilson interview, April 27, 2009.

³⁹⁹ Russell, Nick, *Morals and the Media*, (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1994) pg. 53.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

of the columnist and was referencing reporters. In 1962, the year Fisher began his column, Eugene Webb, then the Director of Research at the Medill School of Journalism wrote, “It is the columnist’s role to express opinions.”⁴⁰¹ Anthony Westell, was a political reporter in Ottawa and for two years a columnist for the *Toronto Star*. He gave up his column and explained his reasoning this way.

As I wrote to my editor, Marty Goodman, I have come to the conclusion that I am not a good columnist. This is not false modesty; I still think I’m a pretty good political reporter and analyst. But I do not write well enough to worth reading on the score alone, and I am not enough of an extrovert to impose my personality on the facts.⁴⁰²

Fisher thought of himself as enough of an “egocentric” that he took “satisfaction” in imposing his take through his column. Fisher remembers advice he got from the Canadian journalist Greg Clark. “He always used to make the point to me...you’ve got a tendency to want to judge things. He said that’s fine. He said just keep on doing it.”⁴⁰³

How impartial was the judge? It is clear that Fisher’s column and television work gave him a platform that he relished and that he used. It is clear that part of the reason for the impact of his journalism resulted from the information and insight he gained as a participant. Politicians of all parties were aware of Fisher’s many roles and still they respected him. Most journalists were aware of his many roles and, while some did not agree with him, they read him partly because of his contacts, experiences and deep knowledge of the political process. But what of his readers and viewers, did they have the necessary information about Fisher to put the information in his work into perspective? Not all of Fisher’s participant roles were public knowledge. During

⁴⁰¹ Webb, Eugene, “One way to tell a columnist”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall, 1962, pg. 23.

⁴⁰² Westell, Anthony, *The Inside Story*, (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2002) pg. 170.

⁴⁰³ Fisher interview, March 22, 2009.

his years as a politician his audience knew Fisher was an MP and sometimes that he was a CCF or NDP caucus member. They were less likely to be aware of his parliamentary committee assignments or his position within the caucus or party. After he left politics his audience did not know that he actively advised ministers such as Marc Lalonde, John Munro and Iona Campagnolo. When asked Fisher could not recall ever recusing himself from a television interview because of his other interests.⁴⁰⁴ On the *CTV* program “Question Period” Fisher interviewed cabinet ministers almost weekly, including Munro and Lalonde and others. As a TV commentator in Ottawa his background was only occasionally described and rarely fully. Copies of his program are not available so it is not possible to ascertain what disclosure was provided in those programs.

As a columnist his editors provided little information for readers and Fisher himself did not disclose his interests on a regular basis. His active role at Hockey Canada was well known. There were many references to Fisher in stories about Hockey Canada. His participation was acknowledged in his magazine pieces but disclosure was rare in his *Toronto Sun* columns.

Did a conflict of interest exist when Fisher wrote his column while a politician? Politicians are the key source for political journalists. One analysis of the relationship between journalist and politicians by Paolo Mancini put the trust issue this way.

Newspersons recognize that familiarity with political figures implies risk, problems and often ambiguous situations, but at the same time they admit that such familiarity is an essential part of their job. Not only is it necessary for the journalists to have a specific knowledge of the subjects they are working on, but must be interactionally competent, which can only be achieved through direct experience. The

⁴⁰⁴ Fisher interview, November 23, 2008.

problem here is that the role differences between politicians and journalists tend to dissipate.⁴⁰⁵

Fisher however was both rolled into one. In this rare case could the roles “dissipate” and were there consequences for Fisher both as participant and observer because of his dual profession? The example used here of Fisher’s journalism at the time of the Gordon budget in 1963 suggested that Fisher, the opposition MP, knew he had a front page story when he stood to ask Gordon if he had outside help in writing his budget. Mancini wrote, “The ‘contract’ between politician and journalist is extremely complex.”⁴⁰⁶ What happened when that “contract” resided in one person? At the end of the Gordon episode Fisher cleared Gordon of wrong-doing going out of his way in print to make it clear that he felt Gordon was a politician with high standards guilty of poor judgment.

As a participant Fisher needed his peers, members of parliament, to trust him. As an observer Fisher needed to be trusted by those same members of parliament who were the subject and source of much of his writing. Mancini’s “ambiguities” are multiplied and his “contract” is much more complex in the case of Fisher. He wrote about what he saw and heard in venues only a member of parliament had access to and those MPs, his colleagues as participants, knew he alone had the means to put forward his version of events. It meant that Fisher, as a caucus member, a committee member, or MP, could put forward his take with a knowledge of words spoken and positions held while other caucus members needed to reach out to another journalist to try to filter and disseminate.

⁴⁰⁵ Mancini, Paolo, “Between Trust and Suspicion: How Political Journalists Solve the Dilemma,” *European Journal of Communication*, Volume 8, 1993, pg. 38.

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid.* pg. 40.

In turn other columnists, his fellow observers, and writing on the same topic as Fisher, did not have the same access. It was as simple as being privy to an aside on the floor of the House that went unheard in the press gallery or Hansard or being part of the decision making on who would be called before a committee of parliament, It meant Fisher had a context for what he wrote that no other political columnist could obtain.

The advantages and risks for Fisher were many. His honesty and fairness earned him a grudging acceptance by both his fellow participants and his fellow observers but it is clear from the digs and asides by both groups that the position he created for himself was, on occasion, seen as a conflict. Fisher says he played “it as fair as you can...and I took it that if no one ever took it too far to protest that I was respected.”⁴⁰⁷ A key to Fisher’s ability to do journalism while a politician was that he was a member of the NDP caucus. Herb Gray summed it up. “Whatever he wrote did not affect his party to gain or hold power. He had some greater freedom of action. Even when he was writing when he was still in parliament which I guess was novel.”⁴⁰⁸

His readers did not always know of Fisher’s personal stake in issues he wrote about. The title of his column, for a time “Inside Ottawa” and then “Inside Politics” hinted at his participant role. He often provided the participant’s view of politics, and the making of policy, in a way that other columnists could not achieve. Politicians resented the way Fisher rated them in his columns but the reader, trying to make sense of the political dynamics in Ottawa, got an interpretation of the strengths and

⁴⁰⁷ Fisher interview, December 6, 2008.

⁴⁰⁸ Gray interview, April 15, 2009.

weaknesses learned by sitting in the House day after day, in committees and in the back rooms out of bounds to other gallery journalists. The examples reviewed here showed that Fisher was conflicted when he put his own participant actions under the observer's gaze. However his audience often gained a different and unique perspective.

Acceptable practice for a columnist was still being defined. Fisher began his column seven years after the regular political column was introduced in a number of Canadian newspapers. Jeffrey Simpson says that in the early 1960s "there were very loose rules, conventions, in those days around reviewing these things." Jean Chretien says Fisher had an "inside knowledge and an understanding of the functioning of political parties in parliament better than anybody from the outside."⁴⁰⁹ The reader of a Fisher column did not always have all the information about Fisher's role but he or she gained the "understanding" of the participant's knowledge and experience.

Was Fisher in a conflict of interest after he left politics? One example examined here was his participant-observer role as a candidate in Toronto in the 1968 while a political columnist. Did his criticism of Trudeau during that campaign result because Fisher held a different view of Canada or because he was a New Democrat seeking to defeat a Liberal MP in a Liberal riding in Toronto during a campaign where Trudeau's popularity surged? Toronto newspapers reported Fisher's candidacy and the *Telegram* wrote an editorial supporting Fisher's right to be a candidate. However, as we have seen, the reader picking up the paper in the last week of the campaign was not informed of his role as a participant in the political process. Yet the week after the campaign Fisher delved into the inner workings of the campaign using his

⁴⁰⁹ Chretien interview, May 19, 2009.

participant role to illuminate what had happened. Were the standards different in 1968 from today? We know that at least two other Toronto candidates who were active, one as a newsreader at *CBC* radio, Bruce Rogers, and the other as a commentator at *CHUM*, Phil Givins, had to give up their positions. CRTC regulations imposed that on broadcasters but Fisher as a print columnist was under no such obligation and the *Telegram* chose to keep publishing Fisher. It should be noted that when Fisher was a MP seeking re-election in 1962 and 1963 in the riding of Port Arthur, outside the area of the paper's circulation area, the *Telegram* suspended his column during the campaign periods. The comparison with the political columns in the *Star* and *Globe* showed clearly that Fisher was more critical of Trudeau during the last week of the campaign.

Could the political participant be impartial in his journalist observer role? Stephen Ward wrote, "One answer is that partialities can be a hindrance to ethical deliberation. The ethical perspective requires that we assess our duties without the distorting influence of personal inclinations and passions."⁴¹⁰ Ward also said, "We can consider how an action will affect ourselves and others. We can partially transcend our perspectives and critique our partialities."⁴¹¹ In Fisher's case he wanted to win his seat, that was his "personal inclination." Fisher acknowledged his "partialities" in the columns he wrote the week after the election.

However that was after the election. The daily reader of the *Telegram* should have been informed in some way that Fisher was a participant and observer in the political process in the days before the election. A columnist is read for his or her opinion but

⁴¹⁰ Ward, Stephen, "Utility and Impartiality: Being Impartial in a Partial World." *Journal of Media Studies*, June 2007, pg. 157.

⁴¹¹ *ibid.* pg. 159.

in this case the appearance of a conflict of interest did exist and the limited disclosure did not provide the reader of the column with enough information. The *Telegram* should have provided disclosure.

The issues of disclosure and partiality were also present in Fisher's work with Hockey Canada. On the board of Hockey Canada Fisher was the one member who, according to Chris Lang, "had no vested interest." Lang says Fisher, "had no axe to grind so he was the most objective of anybody. He never abused it from his column point of view. He very rarely came out in his column and used that."⁴¹² However we have seen that Fisher wrote about board issues without disclosing his role. Ward holds that "Journalists should not become so emotionally close to any group that they do not report 'inconvenient' negative facts or dismiss the interests of other groups. These are facts the public should know."⁴¹³ Fisher was invested in the 1972 Canada-Russia series and that should have been disclosed on a regular basis in his *Toronto Sun* columns about the series. He was in Moscow, sitting not in the press box but beside his Hockey Canada colleagues, due to his position at Hockey Canada. If one uses as a guideline the *CBC* policy code then disclosure was required. Although this was quoted earlier in the paper it is important to repeat that it states disclosure is required, "Where such interest might conceivably be construed as being in actual, apparent or potential conflict with their duties to the Corporation." On the other hand this policy is for news reporters. Fisher was writing an opinion column not reporting the news of a game or the series. Still the reader of his column got an edited insider's take on the series. The reader did not know that the participant was editing the work

⁴¹² Lang interview, May 19, 2009.

⁴¹³ Ward, "Being Impartial in a Partial World", pg. 164.

of the observer. So, either way, a fuller disclosure should have been made to the reader.

Fisher made a significant contribution to Canadian political journalism. He was one of the first political columnists in Canada and the only elected federal politician to go on to make journalism a full time career. The consensus is that his participant experience made him a columnist who had to be read. The sources he developed over almost five decades in Ottawa made him one of the best-informed observers of the political scene. Fisher's approach was to talk, listen and judge.

I took it as it came. I didn't have a definite plan. I just did the same thing every day. I circulated a lot. I talk a lot. I was forty some years there. I had an awful lot of buddies in the protective staff. I got taken up by a couple of people including two auditor-generals.⁴¹⁴

Fisher's status as a former politician meant that Prime Ministers were among the politicians who related to him as a journalist differently from his colleagues in the press gallery. Jean Chretien says simply:

He was Doug Fisher. He was quite a personality. Sure he wrote thing I did not like too much but that was his job. But he was fair. He would play by the rules. And he tells you I would to ask you this...but not for publication. If I could I would tell him and he would keep it that way.⁴¹⁵

Fisher played by rules that have changed. He had relationships with politicians that are rare today and challenged by some journalists. Chretien and Mulroney both lament the loss of a columnist like Fisher. Chretien says:

Journalists could be very useful to us and we could be very useful to them...for them to understand why we make a decision it is very helpful to having informal discussion so that you understand why and why not.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Fisher interview, March 15 2009.

⁴¹⁵ Chretien interview, May 19, 2009.

⁴¹⁶ *ibid*

Mulroney is blunter.

I mean to deprive themselves of an opportunity to sit down and find out what Ignatieff is thinking today, or what Chretien was thinking four, five, ten years ago is to deprive readers of a rich source of legitimate information. You can tell by a Prime Minister's body language whether he's in favour of a particular project or not. You learn a lot by watching Prime Ministers and so on and Doug Fisher realized that. He didn't give a damn what any of these other characters said and thought in the gallery.⁴¹⁷

Jeffrey Simpson says Mulroney "talked to Doug in a way that he didn't talk to the rest of us that's for sure."⁴¹⁸ Senator Duffy says, "I believe that because he had been an MP he was able to talk to ministers and other people who would be of his general age, for example a guy like John Turner or Jean Chretien, or Trudeau even."⁴¹⁹ Max Keeping adds, "He could talk to anybody. All the prime ministers...I was a reporter on the Hill for seven years and I don't think there was anybody who could pick up the phone and call any of the Prime Ministers."⁴²⁰

However columnists today see another side as well. For Simpson there is a risk to the closeness Fisher had with the political elite.

Any Prime Minister has so much more information at his disposal than you do as a journalist. You've got the public record and a little bit of inside stuff. So the information balance is enormous and you are therefore never in a real position of equality with a Prime Minister and you are therefore quite easily manipulated and I didn't want to be.⁴²¹

Chantal Hebert says the degree of access is what distinguished Fisher from columnists today.

⁴¹⁷ Mulroney interview, March 27, 2009.

⁴¹⁸ Simpson interview, March 24, 2009.

⁴¹⁹ Duffy interview, March 12, 2009.

⁴²⁰ Keeping interview, April 15, 2009.

⁴²¹ Simpson interview, March 24, 2009.

That is something you get over time and it also something you get if you want to. You can choose not to want to. Almost every columnist, that is a senior columnist, has some experience of talking with politicians and political leaders and not turning around and telling all in the column the next day. One of the reasons people talk to columnists is that we don't actually quote them. And sometimes you don't even know that we spoke to them. I mean a columnist who doesn't have that experience is a very odd columnist.⁴²²

Hebert says that another thing that distinguished Fisher from other participant columnists is that “he didn't use his columns to become a remote spin-doctor which most of them do.”⁴²³

Would Fisher be able to be a participant-observer today? Iona Campagnolo doesn't think so.

I doubt it because it has become so extremely partisan. And there is...seems to be a declared wall set up between the government and the media which probably would not lend itself to the trust that is needed there. But in my time, 30 years ago, I think there was a lot of interaction between the media and the federal ministry in government. It wasn't collusion it was another voice coming from the people you had to hear.⁴²⁴

Herb Gray agrees:

It would be very difficult. There may be conflict of interest rules like at the CBC or a newspaper on what you can do. I'm not aware of any journalist, whether sport or otherwise, who are simultaneously on some kind of advisory group...There is no doubt that he had a status that I don't know if any journalist today would be in that position.⁴²⁵

Mulroney says today there is a “degree of cynicism that developed between media and politicians,” and Fisher “was a different breed of cat and I don't think we are going to see too many like him any more.”⁴²⁶

⁴²² Hebert interview, March 16, 2009.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Campagnolo interview, March 16, 2009.

⁴²⁵ Gray interview, April 15, 2009.

⁴²⁶ Mulroney interview, March 27, 2009.

Fisher wrote for an audience. He asked questions on his various television shows for the viewers. As he wrote in his final column he brought the opposition mentality to his journalism. However it was deeper than that because for more than 40 years he brought the participant's inside knowledge to his observations. The reader, while not always aware of Fisher's roles, got a perspective that was original and informed. Canadian political journalism is less rich without Fisher's voice.

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