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OP-ED/GUEST COLUMN

'Honest Bob' Stanfield was a class act all the way

Robert Stanfield refused to engage in the kind of media bashing so popular today



BY
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Robert Stanfield's grimacing face has been staring down at me from my wall for about 25 years. He looks as if he's in pain as he grabs his own hands instead of the football that appears not only to have slipped through his fingers, but may have also hit him in the groin.

Media folklore has it that this helped Stanfield to lose his third election and deny Canada 'the best Prime Minister we never had.' Media bashers say a hostile press, captivated by Pierre Trudeau's suave athleticism, deliberately picked an unflattering shot to portray the Conservative leader as awkward. Pump a few drinks into a reporter of that era and s/he'll blame the staffer who threw the ball at the candidate.

But if you dig deep enough, the media come out looking pretty good on this issue. I wanted to get to the bottom of whether the media were malicious or a staffer was incompetent, so I went down to the offices of The Canadian Press years ago and within minutes had in my hands all the negatives from the entire roll of film shot that day in North Bay, Ont., during the 1974 election campaign. Assuming normal camera settings, I was looking

at over a dozen moments, lasting about one-sixtieth of a second, frozen in time for decades. The entire event on the runway may have taken five or 10 minutes and only a dozen or so pictures were taken. These two facts alone constitute a kind of media distortion. The fact that only one picture was picked for the front pages of newspapers is yet another distortion.

However, after studying the entire roll and comparing each picture with the fumbling one that made the newspapers, I became convinced that the picture was very representative of what happened on the tarmac that day. In fact, in the same frame as the fumbling picture, I have the best shot of the day. Mr. Stanfield is catching the ball in mid stride. But his eyes are closed, his face grimacing, as if he'd just eaten a pickle, and he's holding the ball as if it were a wet diaper.

So, on balance, of all the pictures available, the photo editors chose a pretty representative shot to print.

Also in the same frame as these two pictures, is a handwritten note from Mr. Stanfield. While doing research on the media at York University in the early 1980s, I wrote to him with proposals to clean up media coverage of politics. These proposals were of the kind only an angry young grad student could come dream up. Mr. Stanfield was gracious, indulgent and modest in

his hand-written reply.

"I am not very competent to comment on your suggestions. I see some of the things wrong at present but I have not the background to suggest what should be done." After this self-effacing start, he began offering an economical and thoughtful reaction to my version of what was wrong with the media. His most important point was that "it is sometimes hard to get a campaign in focus early enough if journalists report answers to their own questions rather than what the politician wants to emphasize. There ought to be some flexibility."

Mr. Stanfield ended by saying, "I think that, while your suggestions are useful, we haven't really got the answers yet." What a gentlemanly way of reacting to my certain solutions to complex problems.

Even after having an uneasy relationship with television and media performing, Mr. Stanfield refused to engage in the kind of media bashing that people who comment on the fumbling football photo do. He was a gentleman, endured the adamant opinions of a young academic well, and remained circumspect on his own dealings with the press. No wonder he was known in Nova Scotia as "Honest Bob."

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