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Politicians and the media

IN RECENT YEARS, the relationship between governing politicians and the media seems to have been changing.

Gone are the days when presidents, prime ministers and premiers routinely held press conferences at which accredited members of the Fourth Estate could pose questions that might not be easily answered.

Instead, the leaders all too often shield themselves by having a press secretary do what often are described appropriately as ?media briefings?, which do little more than provide oral explanations of what the appointee thinks his or her boss wants said.

The extreme example today is in Washington, D.C., where the sitting president prefers to communicate through ?tweets? and staged events such as the signing of executive orders or the introduction of visiting foreign luminaries.

Rather than seeing the media's role as including a sometimes critical look at governmental actions, Donald Trump sees investigative reporting by such newspapers as the New York Times and Washington Post as portraying ?fake news? and the publications themselves as ?enemies of the people.?

Thankfully, we haven't as yet seen anything approaching that in Canada. In fact, the Parliament Hill press corps has found Prime Minister Justin Trudeau far more approachable than his predecessor. Having held far more press conferences in Ottawa's National Press Theatre in his two years in office than Stephen Harper held during his 10 years as prime minister, Mr. Trudeau also routinely succumbs to media ?scrums? even when he or his government are in trouble.

However, traces of hostility to the media are showing up in the current Ontario election campaigns.

With the June 7 election now just a few days away, only two of th leaders of the province's three main parties seem to be interested in taking questions from the reporters covering their campaigns, one of them going out of her way last weekend in stressing the importance the media plays in informing the public on the issues. On that occasion, Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne took time to answer a few questions and stopped only when it started to rain. NDP Leader Andrea Horwath has taken a similar approach, even trying to answer questions about the apparent $1.4-billion error committed by those who costed out the party's election platform.

The third leader, whose Progressive Conservatives have a commanding lead in the polls and seem assured of a majority government, is taking a different approach, which bears some resemblance to those followed by Donald Trump and Stephen Harper.

Doug Ford, the most populist Tory leader since John Diefenbaker, has been making a series of pronouncements as he cross-crosses the province, and his troops are underscoring the process with daily emails headed: MEDIA ADVISORY. In a typical one concerning the party leader's visit Monday to Nobleton, recipients were advised that his itinerary included a visit to Cappuccino Bakery and Nobleton Fair. Both would include a ?photo opportunity? but ?no media availability.?

We've seen no explanation as to why even local media aren't given access to the person who almost certainly will be Ontario's next premier. Nor do we have a costed platform that would expose the Progressive Conser-vatives to the same risks faced by the NDP and Liberals of a serious financial miscalculation being exposed.

If nothing else, we would like to see Mr. Ford tell the public what his plans are, if he has developed any, for dealing with the media as premier.

Will he commit himself to at least a monthly press conference at Queen's Park, and if so, what would the rules be? Will all the accredited journalists get chances to pose difficult questions, or only those from newspapers and other media with a reputation of being friendly to his administration?