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Those media attacks: all about power

EDITORIAL

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN political leaders and the media is seldom warm, with some presidents and prime ministers seeing both media outlets and their employees as out to get them.

But few leaders have gone so far as to declare the media as ?enemies of the people? and purveyors of ?fake news,? let alone bar reporters from their press conferences.

Yet that was what happened in Washington, D.C., when Donald Trump held his first press conference following the mid-term elections that saw Democrats take control of the U.S. House of Representatives while the Repub-licans strengthened their hold on the Senate.

The low point in the press conference came when the president refused to take questions posed by Jim Acosta, senior White House correspondent for CNN (Cable News Network), shouting ?fake news? and ultimately barring him from the White House on the specious grounds that he had assaulted an intern who wrestled a microphone from him.

The president's action was unprecedented, and CNN filed a lawsuit against the president and several of his aides seeking restoration of Mr. Acosta's press credentials. The judge, a Trump appointee, ordered the pass returned but invited the White House to explain its action and establish a process for any future revocation of credentials.

The lawsuit alleges that the action was a clear violation of the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of freedom of the press and freedom of communication.

CNN says that in 2016 Mr. Trump assured a reporter that if he was elected, he would not kick reporters out of the White House, but that since taking office he had mused privately about taking away credentials.

The agency says his threats fly in the face of decades of tradition and precedent. Repub-lican and Democratic administrations alike have had a permissive approach toward press passes, erring on the side of greater access, even for obscure, partisan or fringe outlets.

Could such a thing happen in Canada? Although some prime ministers, among them Stephen Harper, have held few press conferences and sometimes regarded the media as hostile, none has ever barred a reporter from access to the Parliamentary Press Galley.

In the circumstances, it's reassuring to see Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose election victory three years ago came despite most daily newspapers in the country calling for the Conservatives' re-election, speak out last weekend in favour of press freedom.

Speaking in Paris last weekend at a meeting hosted by Reporters Without Borders, he said attacks on the media by political leaders are really about power ? getting it and holding it.

?The powerful throughout history have always tried to silence those who would challenge them... There's always been tension between those who would speak truth to power and those who like having their power. But we are now in a phase where that capacity to speak truth to power, that very capacity for a citizen to engage with truth, is under attack,? he said, adding:

?Attacks on the media are not just about getting your preferred political candidate elected; they are about increasing the level of cynicism that citizens have towards all authorities, towards all of the institutions that are there to protect us as citizens. And when you combine that with the very real anxiety that so many citizens are feeling... there are lots of levers one can tug on to exacerbate that anxiety, to undermine our trust in institutions and increase our cynicism.

?One of the bulwarks against that, and one of the institutions that is most under stress right now, is a free-thinking, independent, rigorous, robust, respected media. If a democracy is to function you need to have an educated populace, and you need to have an informed populace, ready to make judicious decisions about who to grant power to and when to take it away.?

Amen to that.