

News management won't stick

I would like to respond to a signed editorial entitled "Like twins acting on the same stage" in the *Journal*, Jan. 26.

The article, by Nino Wischnewski, claims the provincial and federal governments are guilty of the same offence. I do not propose to challenge Mr. Wischnewski's opinion but rather deal with a portion of his article which relates to the issuing of news announcements from the provincial government.

He states: "Consider how the two governments invariably make unpopular announcements, like tax increases and patronage appointments, late on a Friday. That's when most reporters have left for the weekend and when major parts of weekend newspapers have already been put to bed. Or how they wait for a big news event, hoping their 'negative' announcements will be pushed off front pages."

"Other governments do this but none can rival the art as it is practised by Trudeau and Lougheed."

Since this is not an opinion of the columnist but rather a clearly defined statement, I challenged Mr. Wischnewski to back up the claim. He eventually provided nine examples. I would like to respond to each.

- April 22, 1983, release of announcement regarding Geophysical and Exploratory Drilling Incentive Systems. This announcement was released on the morning of April 22, with Mr. Zaozirny available for comment to the media at 2 p.m.

- May 13, 1983 — Development Drilling Incentive Program. The announcement was made in the Legislature which on Friday begins sitting at 10 a.m. One of the first orders of business is ministerial statements.

- October 14, 1983 — renewal of operating licence for Proctor and Gamble in Grande Prairie. This was released some time prior to 11 a.m. according to the minister's office.

- July 22, 1983 — formation of Olympic Review Committee. I am informed by the Olympic Secretariat this release was made public at 11:15 a.m.

- February 4, 1983 — government trade mission to Egypt and Kenya. This was also a morning release, however it contained nothing but "good news" such as Albera companies now in the position to bid on projects totalling \$500 million as a result of the mission.

- March 25, 1983 — social allowance benefits changes. This announcement was made at 8:30 a.m.

- November charges against Dr. Nacham Gal were released on Friday afternoon and all media outlets were contacted personally by the minister's office. Evidence of that was the fact all

three city television stations carried the story on their 6 p.m. newscasts.

- July 22, 1983 — Heritage Savings Trust Fund Annual Report. Provincial Treasurer Lou Hyndman was available for a news conference at 10 a.m. after making the report public at 8:30 a.m.

- November 25, 1983 — extra billing statistics. These were released on Wednesday, Nov. 23 at 8:30 a.m.

- December 9, 1983 — investigation into bear killings at Alberta Wildlife Park. This was released late in the morning.

The foregoing clearly prove Mr. Wischnewski's statement as incorrect which must lead readers to question whether the opinion voiced in his article has any credibility if his facts cannot be substantiated.

Ron Liepert, news secretary
Office of the Premier

He conceded the provincial government had not announced tax increases and patronage appointments on Fridays, but offered a list of what he considered to be "awkward or unpopular announcements" made on Friday afternoons.

There isn't space here to detail that list or to give Liepert's response to each point.

Liepert produced evidence to show when the news releases were issued. A couple were as early as 8:30 in the morning. Only one was as late as mid-afternoon, and he said that involved a situation over which the government had little control.

Liepert also challenged the suggestion some of the items involved unpopular announcements. One release began: "Another exciting success story in Alberta's international trade thrust..."

Whether something is good news or bad news may be a matter of opinion, but in the ombudsman's view, Liepert made his point.

Wischnewski said he (Wischnewski) used the wrong choice of words.

There have been other claims in the paper that the government made announcements at times that might result in less publicity. Liepert asked if the writers were suggesting the government should not work Fridays.

There's no indication *The Journal* missed any of these stories. Whether they all got the attention they deserved is another matter.

How the news is presented is a subjective decision, but in my view it was a judgment error to run a tax-increase story on the bottom of the front page on the day of the civic election results. The layout could have been quickly adapted to display both stories at the top. It wasn't the government's fault that this wasn't done.

For the second week in a row, a valid complaint has been made about statements in *The Journal* regarding provincial politicians.

Ron Liepert, Premier Lougheed's news secretary, successfully challenged a reference in an editorial page article that appeared to be a statement of fact.

Columnists and editorial writers are hired to express opinions, and no one is objecting to that. Readers can accept or reject those views as they see fit. However, when something is presented as fact, a writer should be able to show that indeed is the case.

The subject of Liepert's complaint was a statement in an article by Nino Wischnewski that compared the provincial government with the federal government. Wrote Wischnewski: "Consider how the two governments invariably make unpopular announcements, like tax increases and patronage appointments, late on a Friday. That's when most reporters have left for the weekend and when major parts of the weekend newspapers have already been put to bed."

Through the ombudsman's office, Liepert challenged Wischnewski to provide examples of late-Friday announcements by the

Wischnewski said his piece was based on his opinions and impressions as a former legislature reporter. He had discussed the matter with members of the paper's legislature bureau.

EDMONTON
Journal
A8 Feb. 1 / 84

**John
Brown**
Ombudsman



*'Statement of fact'
didn't measure up*

The Representative

Published Tuesdays and Thursdays

Complaining reaches sympathetic ears

By Pat Bell
of The Representative

It was with reservations that I read a letter from provincial news secretary Ron Liepert replying to a recent Editor's comment in which I criticized the Lougheed cabinet for not recognizing the important role played by community newspapers.

Liepert was responding to an April 28 comment by myself in which I excoriated the provincial government for its inconsiderate timing in revealing their choice of site for the proposed Edmonton regional trade and technical institute.

The announcement that

Stony Plain was chosen as the site of the school came after our deadline leaving us to print history instead of news five days behind the daily media.

This disrespect by the government for community news coverage is intolerable, I said, adding I would make it a point to write to the ministers involved. The letters were sent.

Liepert, in his response, explained the decision was made with the greatest amount of confidentiality to

avoid sudden increases in land value while the Department of Housing and Public Works purchased property in the Stony Plain area.

He also assured me that hardly a decision is made affecting rural Alberta that the topic of weekly newspaper deadlines is not raised by a MLA. He said the government recognizes the role we play, however it was to be understood that announcements of a complex nature could not be made

solely on the basis of deadlines.

His explanation was welcomed although it promised little change in the future.

However, Agriculture Minister Dallas Schmidt's office called Wednesday to report he would be making a public announcement Thursday regarding the site selection for the provincial food research centre planned for Leduc.

The story appears in this paper instead of next Tuesday's thanks to this consideration.

It's rewarding to see my complaining may have done some good.

Editor's comment

Premier's aide objects to 'ridiculous' statement

I would like to respond to a column written by Steve Hume entitled "As perceived in the eye of the beholder" (*The Journal*, Aug. 3).

I would like to deal only with the portion directly associated with my office.

Mr. Hume states "the gun-slingers are gone from the ministerial phalanx, replaced by cautious accountants and well-meaning bumbler — press aides who loudly announce it's ridiculous for the public to phone the Premier's office about the issue of mortgage relief."

The statement was taken from a *Journal* story to that effect based on a reporter's interpretation of an overheard portion of a conversation.

It's unfortunate that before writing his column Mr. Hume hadn't taken the time to check the following day's paper where *The Journal* ran an apology with the correct quote I made.

Had Mr. Hume checked the facts he would have seen that my statement was as follows: "It would be ridiculous for a reporter to assume that a government program would be based solely on a phone-in campaign without the input of MLAs."

I can only hope Mr. Hume takes more time to read letters to the editor than he does his own paper's apologies.

Ron Liepert
Press Secretary
Office of the Premier
Edmonton

Editor's note: A Journal story July 23 observed that calls to Premier Peter Lougheed's office urging some form of mortgage assistance had increased sharply after a television station broadcast the premier's office number. The same story went on to say that Mr. Liepert "said phoning the premier about a mortgage assistance plan is 'ridiculous.' He added that the current spate of calls on mortgage assistance is not a true indication of how strongly people feel, since 'people will call any number if you put it on television.'"
The next day The Journal published a correction on Page A2 which said in part: "Mr. Liepert said his remarks were taken out of context. In fact, he suggested the reporter was 'ridiculous' to assume that a government policy would be based solely on a phone-in campaign, not that the government would be immune to the wishes of the citizens."

Beg your pardon

The *Journal* of July 23 quoted Ron Liepert, Premier Lougheed's press secretary, as saying that a mortgage assistance plan is "ridiculous."

Mr. Liepert said his remarks were taken out of context. In fact, he suggested the reporter was "ridiculous" to assume that a government policy would be based solely on a phone-in campaign, not that the government would be immune to the wishes of citizens.

Apparently the premier's office has re-

ceived several hundred "irate calls" from mortgage holders upset by the misinterpretation of Mr. Liepert's remarks. The *Journal* apologizes to Mr. Liepert.

Journal-Sunday, September 15

John Brown

Ombudsman



Column's charges must be backed up

Alberta MLA Shirley Cripps was justified in complaining about a George Oake column that appeared in *The Journal* Dec. 21.

The offending column had commented on reporters waiting outside Government House during a meeting of the provincial Progressive Conservative caucus and Alberta MPs.

Wrote Oake: "As the scribes grew numb, Drayton Valley Tory MLA Shirley Cripps and others could be seen peering out the windows, laughing at the reporters' discomfiture in the gnawing cold." The column concluded: "There is a meanness of spirit among this bunch huddled behind its sandstone walls, laughing at the shivering unwashed."

Cripps said she didn't know the reporters were outside until she came out to start her car. She had not laughed at them.

"I don't think I ever treat the press unfairly. It was a miserable day and I wouldn't have wanted anyone to stand out in the cold. I don't find someone's discomfort funny in any way."

Before she came out, she had been joking with fellow MLA Gordon Stromberg about his enthusiasm for ice fishing. She had also talked to a building staff member.

When I spoke to Stromberg, he said he recalled joking about ice fishing. He said he didn't see anyone laughing at reporters.

Oake said he saw Cripps looking through the cloakroom window near the front door. He believed she was laughing at the reporters, and that she was not talking to people inside and laughing at what they said. Two of his colleagues also saw this and felt the same way.

A column differs from a news report in that it expresses the writer's opinion and there is no onus to be fair or to provide the other side of the story. That's accepted practice on newspapers.

A column, however, is no different from a news story in one respect. When a columnist or reporter makes an accusation about someone, he or she should be able to back up that charge.

In this case, the allegation against Cripps was based on surmise and that is not good enough. She was inside, the reporters were outside, and no one has been able to prove she was laughing at them.

Incidentally, the media arrangements, or lack of them, were not a matter that could be decided by Cripps.

There's no doubt the reporters were indignant about waiting in the cold, but there is also another side to that story.

Ron Liepert, Premier Lougheed's news secretary, said caucus meetings are always closed and there is no attempt to hold a news conference afterwards.

Government House does not have a media room, and it had been suggested reporters wait in the nearby Provincial Museum. (Oake wrote that reporters didn't trust assurances about being told when the meeting was over).

Liepert said the dining room had been used as a media centre before but there had been problems with some reporters trying to eavesdrop elsewhere. This would have been a particular problem as various MLAs and MPs were holding talks in different parts of the building.

"I take no great comfort in the people I deal with being out in the cold, but unfortunately one or two reporters have made it difficult for the others."

In the ombudsman's view, if the media go where they are not invited, they should not complain about not being asked to come in.

Record un-straightened

A newspaper correction is meant to set the record straight, but one in The Journal last week failed to do that. The correction itself had to be corrected.

The original correction may have been technically correct, but in the ombudsman's view it was misleading.

The story began with a report in Wednesday's Journal on spending plans for the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund being passed. It said: "The Tory majority asked no questions before voting to spend almost \$36.4 million next year on irrigation, rehabilitation and expansion of farmland, farm research and a Leduc-based food-processing development centre."

Not so, said Ron Liepert, Premier Lougheed's press secretary. He produced a copy of Hansard for Oct. 26 in support of his point that the Tories did ask questions. Hansard shows 11 Conservative MLAs spoke on these estimates.

The morning edition of Thursday's Journal carried this correction: "It was incorrectly reported Wednesday that Tory MLAs asked no questions before voting to spend almost \$36.4 million from the Heritage Savings Trust Fund next year on irrigation, rehabilitation and expansion of farmland, farm research and a Leduc-based food processing development centre."

"In fact, four back-benchers had earlier sought information about the farm research program, Farming for the Future, which is to get \$5 million from the fund."

Strictly speaking, it is true four back-benchers "sought information" or asked questions about that particular matter. According to Hansard, however, another four Tory MLAs spoke on the subject as well.

As for the other topics, the MLAs may not have asked questions, but three Tory MLAs from southern Alberta spoke on irrigation rehabilitation and expansion. (Incidentally, both the story and the correction incorrectly put a comma between irrigation and rehabilitation and added the words "of farmland" thus changing

the sense of what was being talked about.)

Hansard also shows that when Agriculture Minister Leroy Fjordbotten said he would be happy to take questions about the food-processing centre, no MLAs asked actual questions but MLA John Batiuk spoke in support of the centre and of the need for processing in his constituency.

In the final edition of The Journal the second paragraph of the correction was changed to read: "In fact, several back-benchers commented on the program and four others sought information about the farm research program, Farming for the Future, which is to get \$5 million from the fund."

This was more accurate. Readers of the story were wrongly led to believe the Conservatives had expressed no interest in the topics, and the first correction indicated they were only interested in the farm research program.

Nobody likes to make corrections, but, when they are necessary, the credibility of the newspaper depends on them being made in a fair and accurate manner.

I am told there was a story written on the estimates discussion for Saturday's paper but it was bumped out by other material.



John Brown

Ombudsman

Fort McMurray Today

Premier press chief responds

Editor:

I read with interest and a great deal of dismay a "Bricks and bouquets" column in the February 2 issue of Fort McMurray Today.

The criticism in the editorial regarded the government's timing of the announcement of Bill 110. The column states that the announcement was made in order to camouflage the media-induced stories regarding Dial Mortgage.

The column states, and I quote, "Just have a close look at your daily newspaper yesterday. Both the Journal and Today gave Young's announcement more prominence on their front pages than statements on the Dial case made by Alberta's top RCMP officer". I would like to point out that Mr. Young's announcement was made January 31, the very day the government decided last fall whether or not to proclaim the bill. For your editorial staff to contend this was "media manipulation" is absurd in the extreme. The reason your paper chose to give more prominence to that announcement than any others is probably an indication that it was the item of most interest to readers of

your newspaper. This is a conclusion I would agree with.

A second charge made by the column is as follows and again I quote, "Media manipulation like this is becoming more and more the norm. Witness the fact that when the Tories and federal Liberals have an unpopular announcement to make, it often gets disseminated Friday afternoons — after members of the press have left for the weekend."

I do not intend to comment on the portion of the statement relating to the federal Liberals, however since I am responsible for the issuing of news releases of the provincial government, I challenge the Fort McMurray editorial staff to back up the foregoing with facts. If it can be done I would be pleased to agree with the statement, however I am confident you cannot produce such material. If that is the case, I believe you owe the readers of Fort McMurray Today a retraction.

Ron Liepert
News secretary