

Moments in reporting democracy

I'll never forget the first time I reported an election meeting. It was 1966, I was only 19 and still in my first year of journalism. It was immediately obvious that there was something different about being at such an event if you carried a pen and notepad. There was a faint fragrance of power.

At the front of the empty hall stood a man in a suit and tie, a candidate for a major political party, a member of an elite group about whom my parents spoke in the sceptical but subdued tones reserved for All Blacks and members of the clergy.

Where normally an adult in his position would have barely given a spotty boy of my ilk the time of day, he was staring at me with what I could have sworn was anxious expectation. I might have been green, but I knew that look.

It said: "I'm relying on you, lad. I'm about to say important stuff to the three people at this meeting and if you don't report what I say fully and with great attention to detail, nobody is going to know what a worthy candidate I am."

He stepped up to the podium and began to speak - not to the audience of three (counting his secretary) but to me, the reporter hunched over the press table and trying to look professional but not so interested that it might have been construed I actually wanted to be there.

I don't recall what he said or how he said it. That was irrelevant. All that mattered was how much he said, and how much space that would occupy on page three of tomorrow's paper. My instructions from the chief reporter were clear: this man was to get six inches.

In that election campaign, each candidate was allotted the same total coverage. To this day, I have no idea how reporters worked it out, but I suppose we must have noted down what was said until we were sure the pre-ordained word count had been reached, and then we wrote it up accordingly.

Someone in the newspaper office kept a running tally. As the meetings rolled out, the paper could ensure each candidate's exposure was exactly the same. Based on the campaign's progress to that point, my man was to get six column inches. Very fair, very even, above board and beyond accusations of bias.

Except for the major flaw I'm sure you've spotted - it was meaningless. You can guess what happened. I wrote down the first six inches of what he said, and left. As I departed, he cried out: "Where are you going? I haven't said anything yet..." "Ah, but indeed you have, sir, indeed you have."

I covered another 15 election campaigns in the decades that followed. The power thing waned quickly, but occasionally manifested itself in the strangest ways. Like during the 1969 campaign, when I had my first encounter with Rob Muldoon. He came to New Plymouth and packed out the old Opera House, an event followed the next day by a press conference.

The standard media circus was following him around the country, comprising some of the most senior political reporters of the time. But oddly, when Muldoon looked across the room and asked for questions, nobody stirred.

Great, I thought, here's my big chance to impress. Out came my eager query. The little man turned slowly to look at me, said nothing for what seemed a long time, then snarled: "Well, if you'd done your homework you'd know that you've just asked a very stupid question indeed. Next?"

There was very little next, just me and the other local reporter braving the invective. Later, I said to one of the travelling roadshow reporters: "How come none of you guys asked anything?" He smiled: "Don't be silly, Jim..."

Muldoon got his come-uppance when he called a snap election in 1984. By then, I was editor of the country's second largest newspaper, one with a long liberal tradition. To show there were no hard feelings, I hired him as a columnist after his election defeat.

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We knew David Lange was going to win, and when he appeared at my office door that election eve, I said the obvious: “Looks like you’re going to do it.”

“That’s the least of my worries,” said he. “There’s a bigger one?” “Yes, I’m much more concerned about some of the idiots who’re going to get in on our side.”