

## NewsWatch Monitor Issue 2

### The Emperor's Party Surprise

by Gina Bailey

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Remember the Peruvian hostage crisis? In Lima, Peru, on the evening of 17 December 1996 -- yes it was less than a year ago -- 14 members of the Peruvian People's Revolution, known as MRTA or Tupac Amaru, took as hostages the 500 guests at a Japanese Embassy birthday party for Emperor Akihito. Within days most hostages were released, with 72 males remaining in the Embassy during four months of fruitless negotiation. Finally, on 22 April 1997, the Peruvian military stormed the Embassy, resulting in the killings of all MRTA members, one hostage and two soldiers.

The crisis was an excellent opportunity for NewsWatch Canada to evaluate mainstream North American news coverage of a high-profile international event. If, as seems to be the case, the purpose.2(e) 0.2 ((, one)0.s) -0.2 ( ( N) -0m) 0.2 (e) 0.2 ((, m) 0.2 (e) 0.2 (m)(a) 0.2 (( )) JIJ, ( a 0 0.24 155.2!

government sources while the American p



of Mike Harris' Conservative government. Teachers, social workers and other provincial and municipal government employees joined the TTC workers in solidarity by taking a day off work.

The next day, October 26, thousands of protesters -- newspaper estimates ranged from 55,000 to more than 100,000 -- marched to the steps of Queen's Park to rally in opposition to the government's neo-conservative plan to slash government spending and social programs, and repeal what the Tories labeled the "pro-labour" legislation passed by the previous New Democratic government.

Similar anti-government protests had been held under the 'Days of Action' banner in Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge and Peterborough. The Toronto demonstration was sponsored jointly by the Labour Council of Metro Toronto and York Region and the Metro Network for Social Justice, which described itself as a broad-based coalition of community, anti-poverty, social action and faith groups.

That the protest represented a wide range of groups, and that similar protests occurred in a number of smaller cities, suggested the Toronto demonstration reflected broad-based opposition to the government's political and economic agenda. But Toronto's big three papers didn't see it that way. An analysis of Metro Days of Action (MDA) coverage by The Toronto Star, The

The second most often cited action in the sample characterized the MDA as a peaceful political protest (39 per cent). However, conflictual actions, such as general disruption and litigation, dominated the coverage in all three papers. Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of all actions in the articles were derogatory. A small portion (three per cent) of actions were neutral toward MDA, while 24 per cent described the protest in a positive light. There were no significant differences between the papers. So, while the protest was described as a peaceful political protest in 39 per cent of the cases the overall tendency of the coverage was negative.

Most of the impacts of MDA (71 per cent) were framed as non-political by the papers. Shutting down the subway was number one for all papers, with one-third of articles (33.8 per cent) describing the shutdown as negative. Many of the articles predicted, wrongly as it turned out, that the transit shut down would lead to traffic chaos. The Star quoted Metro Chairman Alan Tonks as saying the MDA "could paralyze the TTC, shut down Pearson International Airport and virtually cut off the lifeblood to Metro's financial heart." A small fraction of the articles -- less than three per cent -- characterized the TTC shut down as serving a positive political objective.

The overall tenor of opinion and op-ed pieces written about MDA were hostile to the protest,

the plight of francophone communities outside Quebec is largely ignored.

Given that news media can play an important role in setting a country's agenda -- telling their readers, not what to think, but what to think about, as Bernard Cohen's landmark 1963 study explained -- then the news media are perhaps unwittingly contributing to the national malaise regarding unity. All papers proclaim support for national unity on their editorial pages, yet their unbalanced coverage of francophone and anglophone issues on their news pages perhaps undermines that support.

Coverage of francophone and anglophone education and language rights was studied through a sample of articles from five Canadian daily newspapers -- Halifax Daily News, Montreal Gazette, Toronto Sun, Vancouver Sun, The Globe and Mail -- for the period January - June 1996. The study was somewhat skewed by the fact that half the articles in the sample came from one paper, the Montreal Gazette, the voice of anglophones in Quebec, but the patterns were similar in other papers.

The findings were that anglophone rights in Quebec were more newsworthy, more extensively explained, and more heavily favoured, than francophone rights outside Quebec. The study also found that anglophone activists were more frequently used as sources than francophone activists. Follow-up interviews with francophone activists confirm the study's statistical findings. Francophone groups struggle, largely unsuccessfully, to get their stories into the media, while marveling at the ease with which Quebec anglophone groups can gain favourable access to major English-language media. Yet francophone communities outside Quebec face major problems. Some examples: in few regions are French-language signs guaranteed by law, and few francophone communities have a right to elect their own school boards.

In the sample of stories studied, linguistic minority rights were defined as relevant to Quebec only; consequently, readers in other regions of Canada could not know about, and would have

