

## STANDARDS OF THE MEDIA

Lecture by

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As an unashamed believer in Peter Bower's 1981 line that the National Party has been "the cement of conservative government in Australia", and in the certain knowledge that this statement is true for the two periods of successful Coalition government in New South Wales in the past half century, I am honoured to deliver this lecture in memory of arguably the greatest National Party figure in Australian history.

My former colleagues in Parliament will understand my instinctive regard for anyone who, in 1961, opened a chapter on "co-ordination of federal and state finance" with "in the last analysis, finance is government and government is finance" or who pioneered private hospital care on the north coast of New South Wales almost a century ago - despite opposition from the public sector - and who, 70 years before the special Premiers' Conference process led by Mr Hawke and myself, advocated a more national approach to national issues and local autonomy for local matters.

My subject today, however, relates to one of Sir Earle's less remarked achievements as a media proprietor.

### THE PRESS

As a recently retired public figure who spent the past decade in almost daily contact with the media, especially the press, I allow myself some reflections on its role and performance.

Having been the generally uncomplaining object of countless words of analysis and advice, I am confident a small rejoinder would be appreciated by my friends and acquaintances in the media whose work I note has tended to improve, in my eyes, as it has ceased to be about me.

The importance of press freedom and quality to any society is self-evident and rarely challenged; yet, over time, the educational qualifications and training of journalists have risen almost in precisely reverse proportion to the public respect in which they are held.

The Morgan poll shows a steady, unrelieved decline. Newspaper journalists now score seven per cent for ethics and honesty, well behind politicians and above only used car salesmen.

My 17-year-old daughter, when asked for a comment on me, replied to the journalist: "Why should I? You'll only got it wrong". In case you think her biased she is on side with the 75 per cent of Australians reported by gallop poll in 1989 who think "stories are often inaccurate" compared with only 50 per cent with that view in the United States of America.

As further corroboration of the concern regarding accuracy, Michael Hoy, the new editorial executive of John Fairfax, remarked to me on his arrival on the amazing number of defamation suits and requests for corrections. His boss, Stephen Mulholland, last week agreed that writers are "not as attentive to the facts" as they should be.

During recent years there has been an upsurge in media critique so, before I join in, let me lay aside three popular misconceptions with which I disagree, although they are widely and passionately held in the community, especially on the conservative side of politics.

The press, in my view, is not politically biased. While a majority of journalists would be left of centre in personal values they and their papers are mostly "agin the government". This is especially true of the Fairfax papers who see themselves as unofficial opposition and community conscience.

The Sydney Morning Herald and Sun Herald, for example, in their general reporting have been very hard, often unreasonably and unfairly so in my view, on Messrs Askin, Wran, Unsworth, Greiner, Howard and Hawke, to name a few.

Secondly, Australian journalists go out of their way to avoid attacking politicians' personal lives -unlike their counterparts in the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere. One can philander, get drunk or gamble to excess and still be ignored with sensitivity.

Thirdly, independence is firmly and properly established and guarded with great zeal or, some might say, paranoia. Publishers and editors, in my experience, seldom, if ever, interfere.

I do not believe, therefore, in the conspiracy, bias and invasion of privacy theories. The problem is rather one of professional culture and competence, often accompanied by poor management or none at all.

Rodney Tiffen, in *News & Power*, describing the media's constraints, says:

"Its daily operations are bounded by organisational deadlines and production demands plus limited access to the world on which it is seeking to report. Its economic logic is governed by marketing orientations which decree that more probing and deeper reporting are rarely rewarded by larger audiences, while in terms of sensationalism and gimmicks some see an inverse relationship between quality and marketing success. Its employment and management practices allow only the most precarious sense of any professionalism beyond technical competence and productivity".

Milton Cockburn (Media Watch, January 1990) sees this as a necessary limitation to media criticism. I see it as reflecting a well justified defensiveness, as "protests too much".

You can use the same words for the business of politics, with equal or greater accuracy, but apparently the same limitation of criticism does not apply.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDIA

With that preamble, the following are my reflections, obviously derived mostly from the Sydney scene but probably of some relevance around Australia.

- \* "A commitment to the truth of the things most obviously lacking in Australian journalism."

This is an amazing but correct piece of self-analysis by Richard Glover. He added "the reporter's commitment is to boosting the significance of the story and not to giving us an accurate sense of a lived and fluid reality. The answer to the question 'How bad?' is inevitably 'Bloody bad!'

"Reality, of course, is a world of moderate successes and failures but journalism continues to prefer life at the extremes.

"The hysteria is built into the structure of news gathering ... all the pressures go one way towards building up the story ... and against it can only stand the reporter and some sort of commitment to give readers an accurate sense of their world", Glover said.

In my experience, the relentless drive to get a story up, especially with by-lines commonplace, easily wins out over the truth both as to facts and, more importantly, context or significance.

- \* Conflict is the basis for news coverage. It is exaggerated where it exists and created or stimulated when it does not. Invariably, when legislation itself is not worth reporting, a conflict between ministers or interest groups about it is.

Even papers such as The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age have given up any pretence to being journals of record. People are interested in what happens, television can't meet the need, yet the so-called quality press considers it infra dig to report events.

- \* The Sydney Morning Herald now often has effectively five to seven pages of views up front - so called "analysis", completely overwhelming the reporting in the news pages. News and opinion have become hopelessly mixed and many inexperienced and inexpert reporters parade their views or prejudices in their news reports. Regrettably, The Australian shows signs of going the same way.

I note, with some alarm, that both the Prime Minister, Mr Keating, and Conrad Black have expressed similar views in the past two weeks.

- \* The tone of the media - ABC and the Fairfax press especially - has become unremittingly negative and the style arrogant or smart-alec.

Peter Collins once joked after a series of reports on the health system which pointedly ignored all the achievements and grossly exaggerated the negatives: "If I discovered a cure for cancer, the tele would headline 'Collins discovers cure for cancer'. The Sydney Morning Herald heading would be: 'Collins discovers cure for cancer - too late for thousands'".

John Fahey asked an ABC journalist what he needed to do to get a run with his announcement of a youth jobs programme at a time of record unemployment and was met with "stuff up!".

John Button, often the victim of media abuse of his tendency to honesty, once said of Australia's political reporters: "They were all trained on police rounds and they still believe the only good story is an accident".

This is not only an Australian occurrence. The September issue of Editor and Publisher reports that newspaper articles are now being condemned for the inexorable negativity of narrow-minded reporting.

- \* The whole culture is smart-alec and cynical beyond rhyme or reason. As Bill Hayden put it: "There is too often an arrogance in reporting in which the subject being reported is derided, sometimes to the point where the reader feels embarrassed for the subject".

On the morning after the "One Nation" statement this year, The Sydney Morning Herald was almost visibly preening at having found the one person to lose his job as a result - the bridge operator on the old Glebe Island Bridge.

Smart? Maybe!

In a more detailed sense, headline writing is the art of being smart or sensational, regardless of the accuracy or relevance to the story itself, much less the facts. The common defences from working journalists that "the sub rewrote the intro" and "it's the headline not the story" are often justified.

The use of "anonymous sources" to express opinions about people or institutions is widespread and often is the entire basis of a story. As Trevor Kennedy puts it: "This does not meet ordinary standards of fairness".

- \* Reliance on interest groups is excessive and selective. The credit explicitly given by many journalists to vested interest groups is one area where bias does tend to show through. The Teachers' Federation, the Nature Conservation

Council, the Doctors' Reform Society enjoy easy and fulsome access with their views; the AMA, the Chamber of Mines, the Farmers' Association do not. Healthy cynicism of interest group views is no doubt desirable but only if applied with objectivity and balance.

- \* The herd instinct is overwhelming in both federal and state press galleries. The media have moved from observers to active participants in politics, taking positions, seeking outcomes, interviewing each other to build momentum in a particular direction; and, indeed, often writing for "each other", that is, to seek affirmation and approval.

There is a mind-numbing uniformity of approach and opinion on even the most controversial situations. The culture of lowest common denominator is firmly in place and anyone who bucks the system is effectively ostracised. This is accentuated by the young age and frequent turnover which removes the sense of perspective that comes from experience and reduces the confidence required to stand against the tide.

The blood lust which is the media's version of the tall poppy syndrome is a variation of this. A remarkable game of "build'em up and tear'em down" is played with leaders, be it in politics, business or sport, with little or no concession to dictates of fairness or merit.

- \* There is a remarkable sensitivity to criticism. "Don't shoot the messenger" is an easy out for many a journalist sprung, preferring a wrong story to no story. If politicians displayed the same thin-skinned reaction to criticism of inaccuracy, straight error, arrogance or rudeness as many journalists, they would be castigated quite rightly in the press.

The Sydney Morning Herald's response to its appallingly negligent opinion poll story recently about John Hewson is a classic case.

The Sydney Morning Herald editors did have the courage to start the "who is right" ombudsman. This was short-lived. It was opposed by the AJA and by many Herald journalists. Gerard Henderson is right (Media Watch, December 1991) in attributing its failure to a combination of weak management, strong union and an excessively legalistic approach by Mr Mastermann, QC.

It would be a worthy test of the new broom at Broadway if an effective ombudsman along the lines of some US examples was created.

News media monitoring should also be developed. Why the media, which promote an often unreal standard of accountability for every public figure or institution should not be subject to the same consistent scrutiny of ethics and quality, beats me.

## **STRONG MANAGEMENT NEEDED**

In summary, the media and those who work in it need to be managed. They are not a world on their own. Strong editorial and management direction is required to produce a culture change which will better meet the needs and desires of the market and the dictates of professionalism and quality, otherwise the reputation of journalists and the media will continue to decline and, far from being the very positive force for good in the community it can and should be, it will encourage superficiality and mediocrity at the expense of the public good.

John Fairfax, in the 1989 Page lecture, described newspapers as the permanent mirror of their society.

When we look into that mirror we should be encouraging excellence, new ideas, community harmony. At the moment, the newspaper mirror, including that for the organisation which bears his name, too often shows conflict, sensationalism and lowest common denominator attitudes.

The justification that this is what sells papers does not wash. The readership of Australian newspapers has been generally static or declining in per capita terms for at least 30 years or more and the success stories, such as the Saturday broadsheets, are clearly the higher quality products.

The press is too important and too valuable to be ignored. It deserves continuing critical analysis from its owners, managers and customers - and from itself! It also deserves praise and community acknowledgement.

I have enjoyed making a small contribution to the debate. Sir Earle Page, if he was alive today, would probably say I've been too gentle.