

THE PRESS AND POLITICS

Oration by

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The original John Fairfax was a real newspaperman who obviously loved newspapers and endeavoured to influence the politicians of the day by correctly reading the needs and aspirations of the people - specifically the people in the colony of New South Wales. You can well imagine the excitement of those times, but they were also times of great uncertainty, times of disease and sickness, remoteness and loneliness. All of us had a responsibility then and it does not desert us now. We, as politicians, and we as newspapermen, continually have a responsibility to the people we serve.

If we are not careful, the current John Fairfaxes and the current politicians of our era may ruin what is still one of the great countries of the world, if, indeed, not the greatest. We need to remind ourselves of our obligations in a rapidly changing world.

I would be surprised if any of us here today do not occasionally reflect on the sorts of lives that our children are going to lead. We are concerned about the environment and the lack of things we are doing to help them achieve a purposeful life. It cannot be solved merely by planting a billion trees.

It remains the responsibility of the press to keep prodding the conscience of politicians to create a better society; of leading businessmen and anyone within a community to create pressure to produce a society in which we can feel proud.

There has been an enormous upheaval in the press in Australia in the past two or three years with News Corporation now controlling more than 60% of the metropolitan press. It is an extremely good organisation run by a very able and dedicated newspaperman. What must be a little disturbing is that the two largest newspaper groups in Australia are owned, in one case, by an American citizen who is hardly ever here and, in the other, by a young man who will spend at least the next two years out of Australia learning about the newspaper industry.

Some degree of change is occurring all the time. But when you have new players coming from unrelated industries, there must be a learning process before we can be confident that our media is in trusted hands. And when those hands are tied with debt, it is fair to speculate that some responsible principles might be forsaken to maintain advertising and viewer/listener/ reader numbers.

Newspaper publishing has a series of rules which sets it apart from many other industries. A newspaper is for the good of its readers; for the good of a community. It does not mean that everything the paper says is going to please everyone all the time. The role of the newspaper is to provide, in attractive and permanent form, for the benefit of a local community, a thorough, accurate and objective coverage of views and events, background information and an exchange of opinions about current affairs. This should be combined with a comprehensive advertising service to enable leaders, traders and residents to interact profitably, effectively and harmoniously and to encourage and facilitate local action in the interests of community welfare and development.

It is tremendous to own a newspaper whatever its mission, but really we never own it: it is owned by its readers and unless they can think of that particular paper as theirs, we have fallen down in our job. Almost 25 years ago, my father said: "You might think the Fairfaxes own the Herald, but you're wrong, because the Herald owns the Fairfaxes." My father and I no longer have anything to do with the paper, but we have always believed it was by adhering to strict basic policies and principles for almost 150 years that enabled it to grow into the great organisation we knew it to be. He said: "While the family has financial control of the organisation, it is servant to the principles developed over the years - principles of decency, fairness and clean journalism directed to the interests of the community it serves".

The balancing act comes in trying to gauge correctly the climate between what our readers believe is right and what we believe is right for our readers. Occasionally, it is advisable to massage prejudices, but do not let it be said of any of us, as Walpole once said: "All these men have their price". We cannot allow our allegiances to be bought. Rather, we must make sure they are earned.

The relationship between metropolitan publishers and politicians can be more easily handled than between regional and specialist publishers. I come from a biased corner, but I believe newspapers are an essential ingredient of any democratic society. Television and radio, like strong limbs, serve useful and specialist purposes but without the written word, you deprive society of its heart, its soul and its mind.

Democracy is thriving and spreading. Its rival is in retreat and confusion. If we are to prevent democracy being sapped by the power of wealth, we must once again put principles first and money second.

Throughout Australia there are many examples of people who relegate materialism to second position in their lives. Conversely, we can think of Australians who have played the game hard and been "successful" by bending the rules or obtaining political favors. It is not too mischievous to suggest there is some degree of dishonesty within our communities. Where avarice and power become attractive to an individual, invariably politicians and bureaucrats at all levels become part of the ballgame.

Clearly, in Queensland, decisions are made not for the good of the State but for the good of politicians and public servants. A small group at the head of big companies or unions counts for a great deal and the man in the street for very little. So newspapers, if they are to fulfil their special role, have a duty to protect their readers on the one hand and ensure impartiality and independence on the other. A newspaper editor or proprietor must never be compromised.

Frequently, as publishers, we get complaints and requests from all sides of politics. I would never suggest we should not listen: it is important to have as much information as possible but we must be wary of the motive. It is in these circumstances that the newspaper plays its part in a democracy and if the newspaper shows weakness or an obsession with prejudice, democratic fabric becomes fragile.

Regional newspapers are in a particularly sensitive position. While serving their readers, local government justifiably feels it must have the local newspaper's support for its policies. In small towns the relationship among all the players can become delicate. What the paper finally does, however, must be in the best interests of the community as judged by the paper. One of our problems is that politics has a tendency to divide the country. Sport and disaster are the catalysts for loyalty and unification.

In one of his first speeches after his election to the House of Representatives in December, 1919, Earle Page advocated a policy of unification to bring under Commonwealth control matters with distinctly national ramifications. He said: "I am advocating unification of control in national affairs but local autonomy in local affairs, because local autonomy is the basis upon which every successful nation has been built". As with a successful nation, so, too, with a successful newspaper organisation, and as group ownership has developed among country newspapers during the past ten years, its success has depended on a system of integrated control based upon local autonomy.

Country newspapers are finding a great and growing need from readers for a sense of identity. Local papers, according to Country Press Australia's last survey, are read by more than nine out of 10 adults in the community. Our consistent research underlines readers'

high expectations for their newspapers to provide this identity. Our latest research on the New South Wales North Coast involved face-to-face interviews with 12,000 readers who emphasised the need for a one-to-one relationship with their local newspaper and an expectation of accuracy, reliability and consistency in handling news. Other media is losing the ability to fill this "identity" role.

The metropolitan press, circulating throughout New South Wales, has a hard job defining exactly who are its readers. Its market is necessarily ill-defined. Specialist publications and country newspapers can more easily identify with their market, making their task in one sense easier, but in another, far more difficult. Aggregation of regional television is forcing stations away from localism to bigger coverage areas and this will increase into the 1990s. Diversification in AM and FM and community radio is increasingly fragmenting the listening audience. With change, country and regional newspapers will become the major catalysts for community identity. This is why their readerships are healthily increasing while "broad brush" metropolitan newspaper content has led in the main to static or falling readership. In justifying its support for the Labor Party in 1972, *The Age* said: "We have made our judgments without malice, without external influence and with allegiance only to the responsibilities we believe we have to our readers".

In 1951, *The Wall Street Journal*, one of the world's best specialist papers, said: "We have friends but they have not been made by silence or pussy-footing. If we have enemies we do not placate them." In essence, this is the relationship of a newspaper to politicians. A few weeks ago, *The Wall Street Journal* celebrated its centenary. It reminded us we all should keep looking forward to the next century whether that be one hundred years or a mere decade away.

So, as responsible participants in a broad community, we have to study issues and decide which are important for Australia. We need to assess things such as the taxation system, the education system, environmentalism and breathtaking technological developments. Responsibilities fall on all of us because these developments are so significant they have the potential to remake the world, upset the established order and even undermine the powers of governments.

At the heart of this is the communications industry with its exploding technology and newspapers are integral to that communications pipeline. For the politician, there are real traps which might make him a little more accountable. Newspapers, and particularly the electronic media, can archive almost instantly what a person has said on a specific subject at any recent time. Newspapers have to probe the issues, ask pertinent questions and act in a responsible manner reflecting not merely the will of the people but serving what they believe to be the interests of the nation.

Australia continues to undergo great social change. Newspapers, as the permanent mirror of their society, are registering and reflecting this. Australia is now a multi-cultural society, one third of the population living in regional and country areas. At the turn of this century, people expected to live to 50. Now they look to 70-plus and next century will be living much longer. Newspapers and politicians must be aware of the many changes in our society, including such trends as fewer people marrying, better educated and more independent children, smaller families, escalating drug taking and crimes of violence, more people expecting government help and the ease of obtaining credit. Part of our problem is Australia has been too good to a lot of people who have taken a lot for themselves and given little back. It is the smaller people who have given a lot and taken a little.

This phenomenon has gone on for too long and there comes a point when resentment builds up to the detriment of individuals and society.

It is a sad state of affairs when we see how much people in the United States are making from unnecessary litigation and how prepared people are to litigate merely to seek damages for themselves. I fear Australia might follow this example - which leads me to our defamation laws. These laws and the attitude to the media are such that freedom of the press in Australia is capable of becoming a myth.

Today, real freedom of speech lies in the power of the politician when he or she uses or abuses the privilege of our Parliament. How often recently have we seen politicians resorting to the defamation laws to protect their personal interests which might not be in the public interest? The politician is in a special position and rightly is able to speak freely about anything. The press is entitled to report what is said in Parliament without fear of retribution, but the shackles placed on the press through various State defamation laws is of great concern to publishers and threatens essential debate.

Everybody needs to have reputation and individual rights protected, but it is disturbing to see some outrageous awards made by juries in cases where a newspaper or other medium has a duty to comment or report in the public interest. That is not to say newspapers or politicians are entitled to misrepresent the truth. However, our defamation laws increase the risk of curbing healthy debate and allowing society to swim in a sea of avaricious and indulgent self-righteousness to the commercial benefit of individuals but at the expense of society.

One of the reasons my direct family decided to become involved in the Rural Press group in a more tangible and intimate way was simply because we like the sort of people that live in the country. I work in the city of Sydney and feel there is a somewhat abrasive urgency that is out of character with Australia as a whole. That is not to say Sydney is not an exciting, vibrant city with a tremendous future, but country people are far more intelligent than they are given credit for. They take the trouble to read and to understand what the important issues are. Country people - and the National Party - are in a position to bring about a balance with the city and major political parties to redress some of the negatives that have occurred within society over recent years.

If newspapers and businessmen are to help guide this country, they are entitled to expect some clear policy guidelines from our political leaders and our major political parties. Too often, we operate in a vacuum of knowledge and uncertainty, unable to be creative and to be productive in a highly competitive world environment.

The Rural Press Group, with which I am associated, has had a close affinity with the pioneers of this country through *The Land* newspaper. It has concerned itself with the politics of this country. It has concerned itself with the politics of rural industry. The same can be said of our other papers, which number about 50. I believe they recognise their responsibilities and their role in a changing society, for it is a society that has to be monitored regularly. Unless those of us who own newspapers keep debating the issues that concern us, we run the risk of neglect and decay. Our family has turned to the rural industry because we like it, because it plays a vitally important part in Australia's economic structure and because it has a dynamism that is appealing.

Tonight, I have re-stated basic principles essential to our national well-being but which can slip past us unless we think about them. I would like to think that we can produce newspapermen as good as the original John Fairfax and politicians with the strength and foresight of Earle Page.