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Title:

Speech addressing the Journalists Club Luncheon in Sydney

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SPEECH BY THE PREMIER, MR. DUNSTAN, ADDRESSING THE JOURNALISTS CLUB LUNCHEON IN SYDNEY, MONDAY, 3RD JULY, 1978

Ladies and gentlemen of the Press,

In my more reflective moments, it sometimes occurs to me that the relationship between the Press and politicians is a somewhat curious one. Although it may not be particularly obvious in the purity and solemnity of our day to day encounters, there is a strange, almost Freudian, flavour to it. The journalist and the politician feed off one another. But the more they feed the more ravenous they become. At times it even becomes difficult to tell who is devouring whom. Or should it be who is monsterring whom?

Perhaps we should be contemplating a classification system for that noble institution - the Australian Press conference. I seem to recall having been involved in one or two torrid little episodes this year which might not be considered quite right for display to teenagers at drive-ins. Certainly, if one is allowed to judge from the published results, they showed a distinct tendency to deprave and corrupt the thought processes of at least one or two of your colleagues in distant parts.

Be that as it may, I am sure you must in an occasional unguarded moment excuse us politicians for showing symptoms of the Procrustean complex - a state of mind brought on by the extreme trauma of seeing our priceless pearls of statesmanship, couched in language of the most exquisite clarity and elegance, and holding the key to our very survival, rudely crushed into three inches, single column on page six of the second fold. When our thoughts stride like giants on the public stage they seem to end up lashed to a minute bed while the exigencies of the media merrily lop off head, arms and legs and pay scant regard to the basic right of decent burial. On the other hand, when we ever so

rarely trot out a pygmy little thought of doubtful breeding, it is quite amazing to what embarrassing proportions it can be stretched.

No doubt you would prefer to draw on other parts of the classical tradition, and liken your task to that of Hercules in cleaning out the Augean stables. Certainly Hercules had a lot of shovelling to do before he got down to basics, but at least he wasn't dedicated to aiming each shovelful at a large and rapidly revolving fan.

Obviously, there is no archetypal image for the relationship between the politician and the Press, but I must admit as a frequenter of gardens that I am rather taken by the example of the mating ritual of the praying mantis. As I am sure you will know already, for these elegant and lovable creatures to reproduce, it is essential for the female to devour the brain of the mating male. Apart from conjuring up an entire new dimension of meaning for one or two of the seven deadly sins, what a consummate expression that is of an unavoidable love-hate relationship. You will pardon me for not attempting to identify the respective roles of journalist and politician in the mating ritual.

More seriously, valuable advances have been made in recent years in the contribution of responsible journalism to the conduct of public affairs in the Western world. We can point to many notable examples - the Watergates of Washington, perhaps even the Withers-gates of Canberra, to the media coverage of the Vietnam war, the Lockheed scandals, the thalidomide case in the U.K., the excesses of the mining boom in our own country. Without wishing to argue the toss as to whether it was the obvious frailties of public or corporate officials or the ever ready watchdog of the Press that started it all, it is obvious that a very important contribution has been built up by you and your colleagues in the media.

It is, of course, nothing new for there to be critical media, nor even for the media to be critical in an enlightened, informed and constructive way. What has been new is the generality of this critical spirit and the sustained contribution that it has made over a period of years to a shifting emphasis in the conduct of public and corporate business.

At the best of times this advance must be regarded as fragile, needing little more than a series of errors of judgement, an excess of personal vindictiveness, some penny-pinching by Press management, or a little astute protection of friends by those who control the means of communication, to bring it all to nought, or at least something approaching nought.

Although there have been some shining examples of this improvement within Australian journalism, I think it is more than a jaundiced politician's eye that leads me to believe that the advance has been less significant and less positive in Australia than it could have been. I do not propose to attempt an analysis of the reasons for this - whether they be lack of resources made available for such work, lack of education or training, lack of understanding of the operations of Government and business, or simply the traditional Aussie anti-intellectualism.

What interests and concerns me more is the fact that this development, along with others, has tended to throw emphasis on the outgoing actions of the Press, almost to the exclusion of examination of its inner workings and of the implications these developments have for the appropriate role of the Press in our society. Although there is the occasional flash of recognition of such a changing role shown by the Australian media, I feel that fundamentally it is either not recognised or, being recognised, its implications have not been grasped.

If the Australian media are renowned for anything, it must surely be for their lack of serious introspection. There is nothing surer than the knee-jerk reaction of our Press barons to any suggestion that their activities in the public arena might do with some thorough, detailed and persistent examination by those outside. Indeed it is regrettable that the hallowed principle of the freedom of the press in a democratic society has been debased so many times by being wheeled out as a forward defence against any such threat of analysis. One must pause to congratulate Mr. Ranald MacDonald for his repeated statements on this score, and occasionally to blink with delight as Granny lifts her skirts and dares to flirt with the idea of letting the public have a closer look.

However, whether our organs of public opinion choose to acknowledge it publicly or not, I am sure at least the glimmerings of understanding must be there that the world has changed and the media have yet to change to catch up. I am not referring to the fairly consistent results of the polls that show politicians and the Press vying for something close to bottom place in popularity with the general public. Except for the occasional aberration, that has been a stable feature for many years. What I do mean is that our papers, our radio stations, our television channels, by and large still concentrate on the old approach of gathering information, processing it according to their best judgement and disgorging it in the form they think most appropriate, touched only by the periodic need to drum up business with the occasional burst of blood and thunder, sex or scandal.

This is, of course, a tried and proven formula, and I am confident that it will be with us to a significant extent for as long as we have a free commercial Press operating in a democratic

society. But this is a paternalistic, even priestly approach to the dissemination of current information, when our society is moving steadily and distinctly away from acceptance of authority and priestliness in their traditional forms. Even the sanctity of the medical profession is being questioned.

The citizen of today is increasingly well educated, articulate, critical, assertive of his or her rights. The days of swallowing the mixture as concocted by the communication media are not over, but they are surely numbered. Just as a new emphasis on the accountability of governments to the public has developed, so I believe there will emerge increasing demands for the media institutions to be accountable to their readers, listeners and viewers.

I would hope that the right of a newspaper to comment freely and vigorously will never be impaired, but the increasing sophistication of the reading public must inevitably generate increasing demands that that freedom should be exercised responsibly - crusading editors will be able to crusade, but more and more they will have to justify their crusades with more and better facts and arguments. Criticism of government will always be a popular sport, but to a far greater extent in the future that criticism will have to be argued and supported and justified to the public if credibility is to be maintained.

There are manifest exceptions in the Australian media, but far too often the apparently measured pronouncements of editorial columns or their shrill attacks are little more than a veil for hasty judgements or even sheer ignorance. The time will come - certainly gradually, and most probably haltingly, but it will come - when the editorialist's trenchant attack on a public programme, on economic policy, on perceived bureaucratic bungling

will have to be accompanied at least by some small indication that the attacker knows what he is talking about and may even have some realistic comprehension of what practical alternative approaches to the question there may be. Fortunately our better publications strive towards such a goal, but there are very many more which do not. The trend to public accountability will help change that.

To be blunt, there are many occasions in which the editorialist does nothing less than assume the role of the politician or propagandist - unelected and unaccountable in any formal sense to any but his employers. If the public is wanting to make its politicians and public officials more accountable, it is inevitably going to extend the bounds of accountability to this area as well.

This, of course, is all very prophetic. There is, however, another aspect of the sophistication of community attitudes which is already upon us - and to which governments and the media have yet to adapt. This is the growing assertion of the individual's right to be involved in decisions affecting him, and the accompanying right to have access to and even some measure of control over the information which is relevant to those decisions. The right to air one's views to an audience rather greater than is likely to gather in passing for a street corner orator is also being demanded - the right to express views without the intervention of the many filters built into the procedures of the established media.

This has long been recognised in the letters-to-the-editor columns - and even in the news columns if you are sufficiently influential or bizarre to justify it. Many United States papers have tried to open up their pages a little with innovations in this area - phoned-in comments, regular space for the airing of

alternative views, rebuttals of their own editorials, even in-house ombudsmen to help keep themselves honest and fair. Despite some efforts by the "Age", there is little to parallel that here. And in any case, such attempts, however worthwhile or well-intended, have only a marginal effect on the basic character of the established media.

Talk back radio came along with great promise and even brought some high points of achievement, but has shown an unnerving tendency to sag back into debilitating boredom. It is only with access radio, community cable TV, the various forms of community access or community involvement media that we approach a range of responses to emerging community needs that start to look promising. At this stage of their development, the disasters, deficiencies and disagreements may seem at times to outweigh the benefits. It is certainly true that the excesses of early experiments with these forms have been rather more spectacular than the enduring lasting lessons which have been learned. It is still much too early to be able to pick-out with any confidence the basic pattern of future developments in this area. But it is clear that in their basically more open and flexible character, in their generally smaller scale and potential to relate more effectively to sub-groups with special needs or interests, in their capacity to respond to changing needs and circumstances, the various forms of community media offer a selection of channels for information and opinion of the broad type needed by communities seeking more involvement, more debate about issues affecting their everyday lives, and more responsive and accountable performance by local elected and appointed officials.

It may be quite some time before the pattern of this development emerges. But I would venture to suggest that within it there will be what may seem to be a surprising emphasis on the

use of the various forms of print media. The electronic media bring with them a certain excitement, immediacy and impact which can be very important in a local community's affairs. But from the approaches being made to my Government, and I presume to others, there is a strongly increasing interest in print with its advantages of cheapness, durability, ability to reach a diverse and scattered audience, greater certainty that the information has physically reached the desired audience, and capacity for simple, quick reproduction on demand.

This is all the more interesting, coming as it does after the earlier flushes of excitement about community action, participation, information networks and the building up of grass roots power structures - all of which have now been tempered by a good deal of practical experience, not to mention three years of conservative national government. Groups wishing genuinely to make advances in the areas of community development and information are faced with a number of physical, financial and institutional obstacles which will not be easy to overcome. One way may be through establishing some form of pooling arrangement by which capital and technical costs may be spread more widely so that better quality and more versatile equipment may come within their reach. Such an arrangement would not necessarily be easy, but some of the attempts at community involvement in radio and television have shown that workable arrangements are possible.

Whatever the technical and organisational questions turn out to be, the clear fact remains. There has been and there is continuing a devolution of attention to the local level. Special interest ethnic and local community groups are among the most vigorous contributors to public debate and action. This is not only challenging the traditional modes of public decision-making and administration, and forcing change. By its very nature, it is

also challenging the role and relevance of the established media. Add the pressures for accountability to the mixture, and you have some very interesting chemistry.

I know that Press clubs - except perhaps very late at night - are not exactly shrines of introspection. But I believe in these trends there is much that deserves, or demands, your most serious contemplation. I am confident that the results of that contemplation will be valid and relevant to the needs of our society if two simple but crucial principles are kept in mind. First, that the freedom of the Press should always be seen as a fundamental freedom of the citizen and never used as an argument to defend the entrenched position of the established media against legitimate concern and criticism from outside. And second, that the right to know is also the citizen's right, exercised by the media only by proxy, and should be used only in the interests of the citizen. And the citizen's right to know carries no neat exemption for the media.

I wonder how long it will be before the media by their actions ratify that Bill of Rights.