

“Politics, the Media and Public Policy”

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- Politicians and the media have a symbiotic relationship. They are mutually dependent yet wary, even suspicious of each other. By its very nature, the relationship is both close and tense at the same time. This tension is healthy for democracy. Politicians, in government and in opposition, must be kept on their toes not only by each other but by straight, honest journalists asking tough questions and interpreting events. As the nature of politics, parties and government have changed so has the media. As the media has changed, particularly with rapidly transforming technologies, so has politics. Politicians, their behaviour, presentation, style and substance, campaign strategies and even parliamentary tactics have changed in order to match changes in the media. This is often decried but none of this is intrinsically bad. Politics is a contest of ideas and personalities. Just as our soldiers don't go into war these days on horseback wielding swords and bows and arrows against machine guns, tanks and missiles, smart politicians must adapt to changes in the media in order to survive.

- Not to do so would mean they would not engage with, let alone communicate to voters and if that happens they will perish. Just as businesses want to stay in business so do politicians, governments and political parties.
- Let me give you some examples, first from overseas and then from Australia and locally about how media and political communications have changed over the years. A hundred years ago politicians relied on newspapers and town hall meetings to get their message across. In the 1930s, radio gave opportunities for politicians to speak directly to people in their living rooms. President Roosevelt realised the more intimate power of radio to communicate to Americans through his 'fireside chats'.
- Then television revolutionised the media and politics. This was first brought into sharp focus in the 1960 United States Presidential campaign between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F Kennedy. JFK, by far the underdog and trailing badly at the start of the campaign, understood the potential power of television.

- In their famous televised debates Kennedy outclassed Nixon in presentation. He was tanned, handsome, confident and articulate and wore suits designed to complement the studio backdrop. Nixon was sick, had a 5 o'clock shadow and his sweating made his makeup run. He looked furtive. A majority of the massive television audience who watched the debates judged Kennedy the winner and his campaign caught fire helping to ensure much bigger crowds turning out to his rallies and campaign events. This in turn also played well on television fuelling more momentum, excitement and a feeling of building support. Significantly, a majority of Americans who listened to the debates on radio judged Nixon the winner, but the TV audience was much bigger. TV and Kennedy's understanding of the power of the new medium made the difference in the campaign and against all predictions Kennedy won the election, albeit narrowly.

- After the 1960 election campaign, paid advertising and 'free media', generated through news and current affairs programs on television dominated not only election campaigns but what has become known as the 'continuous campaign' of governments and oppositions between elections. Winning the nightly news on TV has, for politicians, become the equivalent of winning rounds in a boxing match.
- Politicians viewed their 'grab' or 'soundbite' on television as being the equivalent of sending voters a personal 'verbal telegram' in their lounge room to explain their positions on key issues. So, in addition to many other leadership attributes, political leaders had to be able to master the medium of television. For politics, this was the equivalent of movies switching from silent, black and white films to sound and colour. So in Australia we saw, in the 1960s, parties elect new leaders who were 'telegenic' or adept at getting their message across on TV. Gough Whitlam replaced Arthur Calwell who was a dinosaur on television.

- Here in South Australia, Don Dunstan replaced Premier Frank Walsh who never performed well on TV. This was an era where former Premier Sir Tom Playford's cosy weekly chat with the Advertiser and ABC was no longer acceptable. In the more turbulent late sixties and seventies when talkback radio demanded live on-air interviews, when local radio stations built up vigorous newsrooms and TV started its rise to become the principal source of news, people expected more access, more accountability.
- Don Dunstan was a brilliant and innovative leader and policy mind but he always told me that having good policies was not good enough. He said the hardest part in politics was selling those policies to the public in the face of trenchant opposition, including from a conservative, often hostile press. Don was no purist. He knew you had to win elections, and then re-election, if you were to make a difference in implementing reforms and embedding them. That's why the PR aspects of government and opposition are so important in public policy if you want to implement rather than just talk about reforms.

- Dunstan knew you had to lead not follow public opinion but he also knew a leader couldn't get too far ahead. He said you had to bring people along with you. That's why he was an early pioneer in using opinion polling to help him craft his reform message in the most effective way. For many products and services success is measured in sales or market share week by week, year by year. For politicians, whilst ongoing communication is important, ultimately its all about a one day fire sale on election day. The goal therefore, is to make sure you peak at the right time.
- Dunstan introduced Australia's first media monitoring unit so that three times a day he was given summaries of what was being said or reported on radio or TV. At the time this was considered highly controversial. Dunstan, however, often lamented the 30 second grab that he was the master of. I was his Press Secretary and speechwriter. Don would often complain to me that he'd do a 20 to 30 minute news conference and all that appeared on the news was a paltry 30 seconds of him talking or being interviewed. Today, 30 seconds is a luxury.

- By the time John Bannon became Premier from 1982 through to 1992, the news conferences took up the same length of time but the sound bite had shrunk to 15 seconds. While I was Premier the grab could be only 5 or 6 seconds, and sometimes even less, on Channel 7 or 9. Most of the talking in the minute and twenty seconds of time that might be devoted to an item on the TV news is the journalist's voice acting as a link between other 5 or 6 second grabs and images. It's the MTV approach to news that dominates today's coverage, a quickly moving montage of images and sounds.
- In order to get their side of an argument or debate on an issue across effectively to the public, politicians had to ensure the grab was punchy enough but also to increasingly think of visual images to reinforce their message. The verbal telegram became the postcard. So instead of holding news conferences at Parliament House or in a news conference room, press secretaries found the best possible locations or backdrops to stage policy announcements.

- So, when Premier John Bannon launched his campaign in 1985 to have the Collins class submarine project located in SA, he didn't follow other states who announced their bids in a speech or news conference. He did it in a submarine. I confess it was my idea, as John Bannon's press secretary. My job wasn't just to write press releases and speeches. I had to brief journalists on and off the record, respond to their inquiries for comment on issues and prepare a carefully crafted media strategy that included the best visuals to reinforce our 'story' or message. So John Bannon was lowered by winch from a navy helicopter off the New South Wales coast into a surfacing submarine with media helicopters filming and reporting. Later, he was interviewed 500 feet below the sea. We followed up, during an investment mission to Europe, with Bannon doing TV interviews on top of Germany's biggest crane looking over a submarine facility that 40 years before had built U-boats!

- As Premier, I adopted much the same approach by taking the media aboard US and Spanish Air Warfare Destroyers to promote our successful campaign to win Australia's biggest naval ship building contract. In the lead up to our negotiations with BHP Billiton, to reach agreement for the \$30 billion expansion of the Olympic Dam mine, I led a delegation, including BHP executives, to Chile to look at the regional economic impacts and opportunities of a giant mining project. While there, we took Adelaide media to look at the site of the world's biggest mine at remote Escondida so that they, and through them, the South Australian public could comprehend the scale of what would be an even bigger mine back home.
- More recently, I announced that my government would legislate to protect the Arkaroola wilderness area and place it on the world heritage list. I didn't make the announcement in Parliament. Instead my news conference was at the top of a mountain in the Flinders.

- That was logistically hard and time consuming for me and for the media but our message backed by stunning images gave us real punch in explaining why it would be wrong to ever allow uranium mining there and why we needed the support of the Upper House to get our legislation through intact.
- I announced health policies in hospitals alongside patients and staff and launched our urban forest campaign to plant 3 million trees by being filmed in muddy boots alongside the kids and pensioners planting them, and so on.
- I was nicknamed Media Mike. That was fine, after all, I was a former journalist. I was frequently called a 'populist' as well as 'arrogant and out of touch', even though the last two labels would seem to be mutually exclusive! The same branding was applied to other Premiers (Good News Geoff and Media Tart Beattie) because the same kind of media strategy is used by political leaders of all persuasions around the country.

- At the state level, people have wanted their Premiers to not only have character but be characters; to be colourful, not colourless; to be bold, not be the bland leading the bland.
- In Opposition it was more difficult. You don't have the same resources. So instead of just having a news conference complaining about cuts to health funding, in Opposition our media staff would seek out real people, including patients and their families, who were victims of those cuts. This approach provided an independent but supportive third party endorsement and a different face and voice to reinforce the message. In a similar fashion, because Labor was perceived to be outflanking the Liberals on law and order, the then new Opposition Leader Isobel Redmond had herself tasered – although not on TV - in order to underpin her 'tough on crime' credentials and her pledge to give every police officer a taser. In the same vein, Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott tries to demonstrate he's 'fit for the job' by being filmed cycling in lycra, swimming in speedos, surfing in boardshorts and playing footy with kids before delivering his grab.

- The media will call this 'spin', the relatively new term for what some call 'pr advocacy' and others call 'media manipulation'.
The truth is that if both the story and the visual image is powerful enough the media will usually find it irresistible. It was the same 30 plus years ago when journalists found a particular punch through grab from Gough Whitlam or Don Dunstan so compelling that the four channels would almost always run the same 30 second sound bites from the same 30 minute news conference.
- Is the postcard approach wrong? Is this strong emphasis on public relations excessive? In my view, it is not excessive if the pictures and the sound bites help you win a policy argument, secure funding for a project that's important for the State, explain programs and reforms or demonstrate to people where and how their taxpayer dollars are being spent. And to be frank, its not wrong if it helps you get re-elected so that you can continue to deliver what you believe is best for your constituents.

- It would be wrong, however, with serious implications for governance if public relations objectives drove policy rather than the other way around. It would be wrong if all this effort was only about presentation, only about the moment, only about getting through the news cycle and not about securing real projects, arguing real policy positions, explaining real programs or why a particular piece of legislation is so important.
- Let us not pretend, however, that it isn't also about winning elections in a continuing campaign that doesn't just start one month before election day.
- So far, I have focussed mostly on television. But that's not the whole story. Radio, both through news, current affairs interviews and talk back, helps put the flesh on the bone. To continue the analogy, it turns the telegram or postcard into a letter or a conversation.

- Radio not only gives you the time to provide background and substance to a public policy question, it also allows the listener to gain a greater sense of a leader, the depth of his or her convictions, to measure their commitment and why they are doing what they do.
- Unfortunately, newspapers are dying. A large proportion of young people neither buy them nor read them. An article last month in the Atlantic, says a survey of growing and shrinking industries in the US since 2007 found that newspapers were worst hit. This is not just the result of the GFC and the current recession in the US. The collapse of print advertising, for instance, has been decades in the making, starting with competition from TV and accelerated by competition from the internet including online sales. Advertisers now have the option of online publications but perhaps more significantly, employers advertise on job sites such as *seek.com*; houses are advertised on *realestate.com* and goods are sold on eBay and Gumtree. This has dried up the 'rivers of gold' of classified advertising that newspapers previously relied upon.

- The twenty four hour news cycle, the internet, and the proliferation of blogs makes it harder for newspapers to compete. By the time they are thrown over your fence most of their news is already old hat. So newspapers have become more info-tainment, more sensational, more exaggerated in order to grab attention. I'm referring to the radio shock jock coupled with Hello magazine approach now embedded in tabloid newspapers around the world. Some say this is really their 'death kick' as they try to make readers angry enough to engage with them by commenting, usually anonymously, in their online editions such as Adelaide Now, where newspaper owners eventually want people to pay money to gain access to. That's why the Murdoch press is so keen to prevail in online news and is angry about the ABC's free online coverage. The challenge for the big media corporations is to convince readers that there are benefits in paying for news online when you can get so much for free.

- Over the decades, at least until the last few years, there has been an increasing concentration of media ownership. In Adelaide, of course, our daily and Sunday papers and our suburban 'throw aways' are all owned by Murdoch. I believe this monopoly is unhealthy. Mainstream media has also become more centralised with radio newsrooms downsizing and current affairs and other TV production increasingly coming out of Sydney rather than produced locally.
- Local TV coverage of events and issues has also become more of the same, appearing less competitive with 'rival' political reporters from different channels and other media often discussing what 'angle' on a story they would collectively take. Older journalists tell me this pack mentality is born of insecurity. Rather than wanting to scoop their rivals, and therefore for a while standing head and shoulders above the crowd, they prefer not to stick their necks out.

- When I was a journalist in the 1970's and when I worked for Dunstan and Bannon, reporters often wanted exclusives and one to one interviews. Today, there seems to be a growing preference for an 'all in' where, for some, shouting at a news conference is easier than asking an intelligent question! It also supplies some entertainment value. Aggro is easier to report than a serious story. Maybe this group dynamic is because there's safety in a pack particularly in an age where fact, commentary, analysis and opinion is more often than not mixed together rather than separated in both newspaper and television coverage of politics. I like journalists and newspapers with a viewpoint backed by analysis. But, the old demarcation line between reporting and editorial opinion has long been broken.
- Today the Internet has the potential to threaten monopolies, with a growing number of people getting their news and comment online from a diversity of media with a far wider spectrum of sources for both news and opinion.

- I say “potential to threaten monopolies” because I’m sure most people in Adelaide still get their online news from News Limited websites. At the moment, I am told, only the most discerning look to a range of other sources which is why the ABC is so important. Just as the media has had to adapt with their own online editions, podcasts and blogs, so have politicians. Most politicians and governments have websites where people can access speeches, news releases, YouTube videos of events, announcements and bios. Many are interactive so that politicians and citizens can have a ‘conversation’. I was one of the first Australian politicians to use Twitter. I was pilloried by some in the mainstream media when I started. It was all too ‘trivial’ even though the President of the United States, the Prime Ministers of Britain and Australia and even Buckingham Palace were doing the same. I found this new technology gave me an opportunity to send ‘telegrams’ directly to people without having to go through the gatekeeping filter of the media. Those who resented it are now using it themselves.

- In Adelaide 'rival' political reporters tweet and retweet to each other incestuously about the events and personalities they are covering long before their stories go to air. And when Rupert Murdoch started using twitter as another vehicle to voice his opinions he was, strangely enough, applauded for doing so! So politicians increasingly use the net to recruit, raise money and communicate policies. Like JFK with television, President Obama understood and exploited the power of this 'new media', including twitter, before his Democratic and Republican rivals in his race to the White House four years ago. Here in Australia, Kevin Rudd mastered this new technology and now has over a million followers at his fingertips.
- So, is the public being well served by this new media age of 24/7 news coverage? Are we better informed? Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair reflected on this shortly before he retired in 2007. He said:

“The audience needs to be arrested, held and their emotions engaged. Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked. The consequences of this are acute. First, scandal or controversy beats ordinary reporting hands down.

News is rarely news unless it generates heat as much as or more than light. Second, attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgement. It is not enough for someone to make an error. It has to be venal.

Conspiratorial.

...Third, the fear of missing out means today’s media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits. But no-one dares miss out. Fourth, rather than just report news, even if sensational or controversial, the new

technique is commentary on the news being as, if not more important than the news itself.

So- for example – there will often be as much interpretation on what a politician is saying as there is coverage of them actually saying it. In the interpretation, what matters is not what they mean; but what they could be taken to mean.

This leads to the incredibly frustrating pastime of expending a large amount of energy rebutting claims about the significance of things said, that bears little or no relation to what was intended.

In turn, this leads to a fifth point: the confusion of news and commentary. Comment is a perfectly respectable part of journalism. But it is supposed to be separate.

Opinion and fact should be clearly divisible. The truth is a large part of the media today not merely elides the two but does so now as a matter of course.”

- Closer to home, former Federal Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner, in his recent book *'Sideshow: Dumbing down Democracy'*, lamented the trivialisation of public policy debate in Australia by both media and politicians alike. He is right to criticise both. Let me quote from him:

“Under siege from commercial pressures and technological innovation, the media are retreating into an entertainment frame that has little tolerance for complex social and economic issues. In turn, politicians and parties are adapting their behaviour to suit the new rules of the game – to such an extent that the contest of ideas is being supplanted by the contest for laughs. While its outward forms remain in place, the quality of our democracy is being undermined from within. One of its critical components, a free and fearless media, is turning into a carnival sideshow.”

Tanner continued:

“The creation of appearances is now far more important for leading politicians than is the generation of outcomes. This produces a good deal of deception, and an approach that I call ‘the politics of the moment’. Winning today’s micro-argument is all important, and tomorrow can look after itself. This breeds a collective mentality of cynicism and manipulation. Policy initiatives are measured by their media impact, not by their effect.....the sideshow syndrome is eroding public faith in democratic politics. As political coverage gets sillier, politicians are forced to get sillier to get coverage. The antics, hyperbole, and spin that have eventuated now alienate many voters....I don’t seek to allocate blame. Proprietors, editors, journalists, politicians, bureaucrats, and voters are all contributing to the degrading of democratic politics. Yet, in doing so, they are all acting more or less rationally and reasonably in response to the pressures, rewards, and punishments that govern their behaviour”.

- Its not just politicians who are whingeing about what is happening, as entertainment values seem to condition politics and political coverage. Former newspaper editor and online publisher, Eric Beecher, wrote:

“The media is dumbing down as owners, editors, producers and journalists respond to what they perceive...to be the desires of their audiences. The result is a media obsession with celebrity, fame, trivia and lifestyles to the point where many in the so-called ‘quality media’ now believe they cannot attract a broad constituency without large dollops of celebrity gossip and soft lifestyle coverage...while the dumbing down approach maintains the macro audiences that attract advertisers, it simultaneously drives away the micro audience that craves quality journalism.”

- Australia is not alone in this trend. Respected US media commentator, Bill Moyers, has said:

“...that coverage of Britney Spears shaving her head and Anna Nicole Smith’s death easily surpassed that of American soldiers’ deaths in Iraq: ‘In-depth coverage on anything, let alone the bleak facts of power and powerlessness that shape the lives of ordinary people, is as scarce as sex, violence and voyeurism are pervasive”.

- The end result of the ‘shock and gotcha’ approach to journalism is that politicians either excessively try to stage manage their announcements and appearances or become overly risk averse and evasive. Former ABC Lateline presenter, Leigh Sales, is quoted in Lindsay Tanner’s book as describing this syndrome in these terms:

“Many of our politicians have a pervasive fear of saying anything that may hand ammunition to opponents. They have concluded that honest or direct answers are a risk generally not worth taking. All but the most courageous hide behind a wall of excessive media management. In turn, their heavily scripted and stage-managed performances lead voters to become disengaged and distrustful...(leading to) a vicious cycle in which the public and the media want politicians to be honest but attack them if they err, admit doubt or show weakness. The media is partly to blame for this, although politicians aren’t passive victims”.

- So, what do I think, as a former student editor, then political journalist, press secretary to three Premiers, MP, Minister, Opposition Leader and Premier? Well, its not all bad. I believe the ABC, SBS and Sky News do a very good job in presenting the news in a straight and un-biased way and, importantly, presenting a diverse but balanced array of commentary. On Sky, where I am now one of their regular commentators, I am paired with former NSW Liberal Leader, Kerry Chikarovski.
- ABC Radio National continues to maintain the highest standards of tough, ethical journalism and so do programs like 4 Corners, 7.30 and Lateline.
- But there are dangers. The continuous and constant 24 hour a day, 7 days a week news cycle has put enormous pressure on local as well as national media and politicians to constantly find 'new product' to fill the gap on 'thin' news days.

- Many journalists will despair that commercial television news coverage has become increasingly trivial, not just in the 'if it bleeds it leads the bulletin' syndrome, where crime and road accidents seem to dominate, but also in their reporting of politics. Many older hands in journalism are also saddened at what they see as the decline over the years of The Advertiser and Sunday Mail, which despite some excellent reporters has fallen into the 'entertainment or anger' trajectory.
- Worst of all, in the eyes of many from my side of politics, is The Australian. This is a pity because it has some serious, award winning journalists, whose analysis as well as strong opinions can add to public debate nationally. Unfortunately, its editorial line sometimes infects its reporting of politics. Even worse, there are examples where political bias and distortion collide in a toxic cocktail which has nothing to do with real journalism.

- It is more to do with the desire of some desperate journalists, far below the calibre of the paper's own Paul Kelly, Peter von Onselen or Mike Steketee, to be noticed. They try to be amateur political 'players' themselves or at worst, twist their story and sometimes even their quotes, in order to get their 'beat up' into the paper. Late last year, academic Robert Manne, in his evidence to the media inquiry being led by former Federal Court Judge Ray Finkelstein, attacked The Australian for what he claimed was a strong political bias against the Gillard Government. This followed his major piece entitled 'Bad News' in the Quarterly Essay criticising The Australian, which, along with the newspaper's reply, is well worth a read.
- The vast majority of journalists, like most politicians, are decent and honest professionals who are now under increasing pressure to 'beat up' and simplify stories about important issues in order to attract attention rather than provide insight.

- The consequences of this continuous downward spiral are even worse for the public, not just in terms of limiting sensible debate on serious issues important to their lives. Just as people are being turned off mainstream media they are also being turned off politics and involvement in the political process. On countless occasions people of talent, from all walks of life and from all sides of politics, have said to me; “I’ve thought seriously about running for elective office myself but the way the media is these days makes me think why would I put myself and my family through all that”.
- I remain hopeful, however, that the decline of traditional media empires under pressure from the internet will result in greater diversity and greater quality reporting and commentary, but it will probably be online rather than an over the fence. And that’s a shame.
- In the meantime, while we await the outcomes of the Finkelstein inquiry in Australia and the Leveson inquiry in Britain, the ABC’s Media Watch remains essential viewing.

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