

POLITICS AND THE MEDIA CIRCUS

Address by Gareth Evans, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, to Australian Institute of Political Science (AIPS) 65th Anniversary Dinner, Sydney, 20 February 1998.

The organisers of tonight's 65th Anniversary Dinner were on to something in making the specific theme of this evening the relationship between politics and the media. We needed something to divert us from the orgy of self-congratulation in which Institute members would otherwise have indulged, and this topic was well calculated to provide it.

I don't want to spend much time making self-evident points about the inherent importance of the media to the political process - although this is the soothing and stroking part that won't get me into any trouble! Whether we like it or not - and most political practitioners have very mixed views on the subject, probably varying with the number of bruises we are currently nursing - it's impossible to imagine a democratic polity being conducted in this or any other country around the world *without* the media.

Unless the media plays the middle-man role that gave it the "media" name - transmitting information, imagery, analysis, ideas, arguments and appeals back and forth between governors and governed - our system of government would be indistinguishable from that which used to be run from behind the Kremlin walls, and still is run from inside the Zhongnanhai senior leaders compound in Beijing.

But our theme tonight is not just politics and the media: it's "politics and the media *circus*". This is where the organisers have really come into their own, and not just because of the graphic - but of course wildly inaccurate - imagery this conjures of the nation's press galleries being comprised of clowns, dwarves, bimbos and toothless old lions. Rather it's because this description raises squarely, for us to think about, the whole question of the media as spectacle and entertainment - and whether or not *that* part of its role is now so dominant in political discourse as to leave our society the poorer.

Nobody doubts that *part* of the media's role - and this goes as much for prints as electronics - is to entertain. The secret of Ministerial success might be to become a dead bore - as Alexander Downer is now beginning to understand - but it's not likely to elevate you to the journalists' pantheon. The question is rather how much entertainment is *too* much: have we reached the point where the substance is all but totally being consumed by the urge for spectacle?

I think we probably *have* now reached that point, and that our polity is the poorer for it. I also think that the cause is probably lost forever so far as the tabloids, mainstream commercial radio, and mainstream commercial television most of the time are concerned. There is still some hope for public television and radio, for at least some of the self-consciously quality press, and for commercial television to the extent that it continues to develop quality niche programming like the

Sunday morning current affairs set. But that's only if a lot of people start taking a long hard look at themselves - not at only at where their professionalism is going, but where their *livelihood* may be going if they don't.

The disappearance of hard-edge reporting about *policy*, as distinct from politics and personality, has been endlessly remarked upon in recent years, but it's worth reminding ourselves just how far the trend has gone.

Take for example the ALP National Conference in Hobart in January. It was a seminal event. We were defining ourselves after 13 years in government and a harrowing defeat. We were doing so in a political context where we were genuinely being seen again by the community as a contender for government, not just years down the track but next time round. And we had completely reshaped and redrafted our Platform, with a document that was full of meat - not just rhetoric - for those who cared to look.

But who can remember any part of that Platform being made the subject of any but the most cursory reports, and any but the most superficial analysis by any senior political reporter? The media was bored by the substance, and bored by the consensus which produced and endorsed it. Cheryl Kernot's truck - and the series of actions and reactions which that in turn triggered - was manna for the starving. Circus spectacle, yes. Information and enlightenment about the shape and direction of the nation's alternative government, no.

Another example, from just this week, perhaps even more revealing. Kim Beazley gave to the CEDA trustees in Sydney early on Wednesday the most important and substantial economic speech of his time as Opposition Leader, and one of immense significance for anyone trying to anticipate the course of an incoming Labor government. It contained in particular three very specific policy commitments: to produce, on current economic and budget projections, Budget surpluses throughout our first term; to produce monthly reports on the Budget implications of new outlay and revenue measures; and to support the Reserve Bank's underlying inflation rate target of 2-3 per cent over time. The speech was given saturation distribution to the print media, and the electronics were there in force to record it.

The result? No coverage whatsoever that day or night on television by the commercials. No coverage whatever next day by the *Melbourne Age*, nor the *Daily Telegraph*, nor the *Hobart Mercury*. No more than a few inside-page inches everywhere else in the prints, except for and editorial in the Brisbane *Courier Mail*, and good business pages coverage in *The Australian*. A little on ABC radio, but more or less invisible on commercial radio.

All this, while on the same day nearly every media outlet in the country had a prominent story about Labor's change of ad agency from Singleton to Saatchi and Saatchi. Maybe Labor's news management erred, in allowing the ad agency story to compete on the same day with the Leader's speech: but if news editors chose to make the trade-off in the way most of them appeared to, that really only confirms the point. The media as informer, fuelling and oiling the democratic process, or the media as entertainment guide?

The converse of the problem of lack of interest in policy is the now almost obsessive interest in personality: politics as gossip, politicians as celebrities, old constraints and inhibitions abandoned. To gain any attention at all for their ideas, politicians have to become performers - playing the media game as far as we can so that we don't become marginalised, but trying to avoid making total fools of ourselves in the process. Not all of us get that balance right all the time, and it's a good question whether we should have to.

Was the national psyche any the poorer for Ben Chifley not doing a turn with Mo at the Tiv - the 1940s equivalent of McFeast or Denton; or Annabelle Rankin not modelling evening gowns for *Vogue*; or Bob Menzies not playing cricket in shorts; or Gough Whitlam - trouper though he always was - drawing the line short of fishnets?

There's no point trying to empty the personality game out of politics altogether. What Michelle Grattan calls the "horse race" side of politics - who's winning and losing the competitive stakes between and within the parties - always has been, and always will be, a source of endless fascination for political players and spectators alike. And now the nature of television means that people think they know the players more intimately than has ever been the case before - and that there is an almost insatiable appetite for ever more such intimacy.

But a little more balance; a little more opportunity to be heard for what you are saying rather than how you are saying it; and just a little more recognition of the desperate need that all of us have for a little private space we can call our own, whatever job we do or public role we play, would make for a healthier society than we have at the moment.

If the demise of interest in policy as policy is one key element of the contemporary problem with the media in politics, the other really critical element is the disappearance of the distinction between fact and opinion.

Most of this phenomenon has emerged during my own political lifetime - the universal by-line, for the news as well as op ed pages; the emergence of an almost universal self-perception among journalists that they are players, not just recorders and reporters, in the political influence game, with more capacity to build up and tear down than any run of the mill party apparatchik; the endless multi-media opportunities for commentary, mixing fact and opinion, that are now available for our most prominent journalists, producing a whole new class of more or less universally recognised media gurus.

All of this is so familiar now that we can hardly conceive that it might be otherwise. But things were once otherwise, and things in at least some areas of the media could be again if the will were there to make it so. I'm not totally naive, I hope, about the way things were: media proprietors have of course always had agendas of their own, as have a good many of the great names of journalism of the past, who have not lacked the capacity to select and distort at least some of the facts they were reporting.

But I do nurture the belief that there would be better understanding of public policy issues, and a better, sharper, cleaner debate about competing options, if at least those media organisations that

have pretensions to be more than mere entertainers were as self-conscious and disciplined as they used to be about separating and clearly labelling fact from opinion, and reporting from proselytising.

There is some self-interest in all this for the media organisations in question. In a cacophony of opinions of uncertain believability, everyone's opinion - as Hugh Mackay keeps telling us - becomes as valuable, or as valueless, as everybody else's. And maybe people won't continue to spend money on what might once have been regarded as quality newspapers, if they're not getting anything much more than mere opinion: if there's not some sense of authority and judgement there on display, based on a hard sub-stratum of factual knowledge also on display.

I may be very wrong about this, but I have a growing sense that those who have been, for as long as most of us can remember, the opinion leaders in the media are losing some of the authority they once had, and that the reason for this is that the way in which they are reading the political culture of the country at the moment, and writing and talking about it, is at odds with the way in which people at large are actually feeling about it.

I have a sense that people are getting increasingly sick of politics as theatre, confrontation, conspiracy, cynicism and policy emptiness - that they do have a hunger for substance; for ideas that really do seem to be addressing the problems they are experiencing and feeling in their daily lives; for political players who seem to share those pre-occupations, and be able to relate to them at a direct and human level; and for a general political environment in which there is less butchery and more moderation and balance.

There's some evidence for this, I suggest, in the huge continuing public support for Cheryl Kernot, and her apparent capacity, so far anyway, to survive largely unscathed a number of media attempts now to force her into the standard macho political model, and to criticise her fiercely when she doesn't fit it.

There's also some evidence, I suspect, in the quite extraordinarily positive reaction we saw from those unexpectedly large number of Australians who followed closely the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention - not all of them *ABC* eggheads, as you could easily sense from the crowds in Kings Hall. What people seemed to see in the Convention was something out of the ordinary (at least when they saw it directly in person or through the *ABC* coverage: the rest of the tv and a good deal of the print coverage was of the old-pol type). There was highly policy-focused debate, conducted with lots of good humour and without party political posturing or much evident rancour - and it struck a highly responsive chord.

I think all of us in politics ignore these signs and messages at our peril. And so too do all those sections of the media whose success depends on finding and nurturing a market of people who simply won't settle much longer for slightly upmarket versions of the pap that's so readily available elsewhere.