

Spies and Lies

Vic Carroll is the former editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and the Financial Review. He is fiercely protective of the public's right to know. Mr. Carroll is extremely concerned at the new laws proposed by the Howard Government to make it illegal for public servants to leak information and for politicians or journalists to receive it and publicise it.

Alexander Downer inadvertently blew the whistle on politicians recently. He said, of accusations that the government had used Australia's electronic eavesdropping facilities during the pre-election Tampa incident: "I don't think any government could get away with that."

What's the bottom line

In other words for governments (politicians) the bottom line is whatever they can get away with. The flip side of this is - whatever it takes. They thought they could get away with the children-thrown-into-the-sea story, and they did, for as long as it took to win the election.

Governments (politicians) are not alone in this, of course. What you can get away with is the prevailing ethos in business, sport and the law. The practice of law has thrived over the last 40 years on testing what can be got away with, particularly in corporate and taxation law.

But the application of what

you can get away with as the bottom line for governments and an increasingly politicised bureaucracy, is of particular concern now. It is one reason why we need a more diversely owned media.

The more independently owned newspapers, radio and television stations there are, the more chance there is that one, at least, will penetrate the government's armour.

The first objective of politics is to gain power, the second objective is, having gained it, to keep it. Concepts like national security, and its close relation, patriotism, have been, and will continue to be, used and abused in pursuit of these two top political objectives.

Politicians are on fairly safe ground here. The media have always been willing collaborators in the photo opportunities politi-

V. J Carroll

cians and their media advisers love to stage, with the armed forces and sporting heroes waving the national flag.

On a much deeper level, the media - historically dominated by newspapers - have rarely if ever, failed to rally behind the government in times of crisis and war. In Australia there have been no famous instances of dissidence like the Manchester Guardian's opposition to the British government's political aims in fighting the Boer War, or The Observer's costly opposition to Britain's armed intervention in the Suez crisis.

But traditional support for Australian government's foreign policy and war objectives has not stopped Australian newspapers from objecting to the natural tendency of government (politicians and their supporting bureaucracies) to over-reach themselves.

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We Have Survived

It was not long after the appointment of Jonathan Shier as Managing Director of the ABC that many of us began to fear for the future of the ABC.

Long standing ABC executives were swept aside. Media Watch and Quantum were axed. A host of successful program makers departed. Some, like Sue Masters, who had done so much for ABC TV Drama, jumped. Others were pushed. Phillip Adams and Kerry O'Brien were both said to be under threat. The same was said for the ABC's in-house legal department, reported to be 'too sympathetic' to investigative journalism.

Jonathan Shier promised to be a plumber who would unplug the blockages and get the creative stream flowing. Instead, it looked like there was more bureaucracy. There was yet another restructure, that seemed to confuse everybody. ABC television at least, seemed to be stuck in a quagmire.

Television suffered the most

Television, which seemed to be his main focus, suffered the most. It lost in both quality and numbers of viewers.

Friends of the ABC called on the ABC Board to bring the Managing Director under control, and return to traditional ABC values. Initially, it seemed that this advice was not appreciated. For a while we were described as "the so-called Friends of the ABC". Eventually however, the Board moved. Jonathan Shier was persuaded to move on.

Since then there have been other encouraging signs. The ABC Board and the interim management have avoided the temptation for yet another major restructure. It seems to be business as usual, with the long suffering ABC staff allowed to get on with the job.

In describing the qualities needed in Mr Shier's replacement, the ABC Chairman appears to be looking for traditional public service broadcasting values. Media

Watch, and its former Executive Producer, have been reinstated. In a speech to the National Press Club, ABC Chairman, Donald McDonald, has supported Triple J, a part of the ABC's output that has often appeared under threat. He has also defended, perhaps with some qualification, the "ABC staff culture" that has often been maligned by right wing commentators.

The ABC suffered enormously from the 1996 budget cuts and later from the chaos of the Shier regime, but it is still recognisably the ABC. ABC Radio has only minor scars, but it will take a lot to rebuild ABC TV and Radio Australia.

There is still a second chance

The Board has an opportunity to find a more appropriate chief executive.

The government has restored some of the funding it took away in 1996, albeit on a temporary basis.

It now has the opportunity to restore the ABC's base funding, indexed for inflation, back to its 1996 level.

Friends of the ABC can now look forward to a more positive role. Of course true friendship always involves constructive criticism, as well as praise and support. Now perhaps we can look forward to the other side of the coin, to support an ABC Board which acts independently of the govern-

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Four Corners' Chris Masters receives the FABC Excellence in Broadcasting Award for 2001.

VISIT PINCHGUT WITH 'THE FRIENDS'

Fort Denison is well known to most people, but how many have made a visit there? Here is an opportunity to join an FABC tour to this historic island. Fort Denison offers visitors a cannon museum, a working tide gauge and a bell tower with unparalleled views of the harbour.

Saturday, 6 April, 2002

2.00 pm - 5.00 pm

Meet: Cadman's Cottage, 110 George St, The Rocks

Food: BYO Picnic for a mid afternoon snack
(Convicts will be fed bread and water only)

Adults \$22 Concession \$18

Includes guided tour of 30 minutes plus ferry transport

Payment: In advance

Credit card is accepted (M/C, Visa, B/C ONLY)

Maximum number for the tour is 60 people

SO be early with your booking.

Contact:

Gary Cook 0404 829372 day/night

Jason Lowe 9489 1420 day/night

Frouke de Reuver 9642 6485 night

We Have Survived

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ment. We can look forward to a new chief executive sympathetic to the values of traditional public service broadcasting.

However, we would be foolish to forget the deep hostility towards the ABC by many politicians, and other powerful interests who would prefer not to face the scrutiny of a properly funded, widely used and independent non-commercial broadcaster.

Some still seek to curb the ABC's influence

There are still those who would seek to destroy the ABC's distinctiveness by sending it commercial. On the other hand there are those who would seek to curb the ABC's influence by confining it into a high culture, middle class ghetto, irrelevant to mainstream Australia.

Governments still like to play ping-pong with the ABC budget. With a tight budget looming in May, some will argue for more cuts, or for funding to be tightly targeted for projects that governments favour. The ABC still has enemies, and it still needs friends.

Darce Cassidy
National Spokesperson
FABC

President's Report

During summer I visited my daughter in the UK. While there I was particularly interested to see what the BBC achieves with their equivalent of \$6 billion A\$. I expected something pretty fabulous. I was quite disappointed at the level to which BBC TV pitches many programs. Some news stories were extremely shallow and many current affairs programs' topics were very trivial.

There are two main BBC-TV stations - one more serious and the other a popular venue for programs. The money can be seen in the number of news programs. The daily morning program with updates from around the country. The very fine documentaries that are made by the BBC, and what is most important, the approximately 90 per cent British programming. The BBC is in the unique position of having funds to make programs to show Britains to themselves, in all their diversity, whether it's a Scottish comedy or a Welsh documentary.

It made me realise that the ABC, with its much smaller budget, seems to be doing a tremendous amount with what it has.

Our front page article is written by Vic Carroll, a former editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and the Financial Review. It is particularly timely, as the Federal Government's proposed new law, if passed in its current form, will make the leaking of information from government sources a criminal offence.

Impact on ABC's reporting

The new Criminal Code Amendment (Espionage and Related Offences) Bill 2002 would effectively put a brake on serious current affairs programs. It would impact very seriously on the ABC's capacity to report to us all and to maintain the only commercial free, independent television and radio news commentary. This law would make liable to criminal charges all who pass on information from government sources *plus* those who receive it and use it.

The law would give significant advantage to whichever party is in power. It is up to all of us to lobby our own Members of Parliament about the dangers to our democracy of any law which erodes our rights to information from sources which *up until now* have not been subject to criminal prosecution. This law seriously undermines our ability to learn what is going on in government and behind the scenes.



Kerry O'Brien and President Blue Mountains

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This happened in World War II when government censorship, aimed at suppressing the publication of information which might help the enemy, was expanded, -- all in the interests of national security - to include the maintenance of public morale, good relations with allies and not offend neutrals.

As a result, in 1942, newspapers were told be careful of mentioning the presence of black

American soldiers in Australia (public morale might suffer). When Sydney's bus and tram workers went on a 24 hour strike on January 25, 1944, the Sydney Morning Herald got the news only into it's first (country edition) before it was censored.

As a result, thousands of people waited in vain for public transport that morning. Censorship went too far and led to a famous showdown between the newspapers and the Minister for Information,

Arthur Calwell, later that year.

These incidents are worth recalling as the present government plans to go too far with its proposed anti-whistleblower bill. By using national security as a cover to try and stop any leakage of information, including information which has nothing to do with national security but *could be of great public concern*. Were that bill law, the children-thrown-into-the-sea story might never have been challenged.

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NSW Regional Conference

The Friends of the ABC is having a Conference for regional branches in the second half of this year.

At our next monthly meeting, we will form a Conference Sub-Committee to work on the project.

We are looking at regional venues.

Blue Mountains Friends of ABC

First function of the year
Springwood
Saturday, 13 April
(mark the date)
Details in the newsletter
"Blue Mountains Air"
coming soon or

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update

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FABC Update

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