

THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL PROTEST

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There is an undeclared war simmering in this country between some sections of the media and proponents of certain basic legal principles. This conflict often spills over into a battle between individuals in the press, specific media outlets, and those from a variety of political backgrounds who share at least one thing in common belief that certain procedures in assessing the guilt or innocence of a person charged with a criminal offence should be followed.

Tom Molomby from the Talks Department at the Australian Broadcasting Commission has pointed out that while most of the press acknowledge the importance of a fair trial, they do not accord this statement the status of a principle and certainly not a principle of the same status as freedom of the press..(1)

A good example of the conflict between the press and the rule of law was seen in Melbourne in May, when the radio station 3AW and Derryn Hinch were charged with contempt of court in relation to broadcasts in which Hinch revealed and discussed the prior conviction of a priest who was awaiting trial on a number of sexual offences involving children. Hinch admitted that he knew that this could prejudice the trial., He was asked .a question: .".... In your set of values, the desirability of stopping him (that is, the priest) was more important than a possibility of affecting his fair trial". Hinch's reply was, "I felt I had bigger responsibility to the community at large than I did to Father Glennon".(2)

This example illustrates cogently that at least some of the media believe that their job is to report the news regardless of the effects it may have on individuals or minority groups in a particular community. In fact, Molomby has argued that this position is the media's usual response to such situations. (3) Molomby, I gather, though a journalist himself, is not particularly impressed with certain elements of the Australian media.

Let me go further. After nearly twenty years of considerable contact with the media I increasingly find more and more journalists and media organisations irresponsible, unprofessional, trivial in outlook and arrogant in style.

"Ethics" in journalism has become debased to the stage where money replaces professional standards as the criteria of morality and where success is measured by the degree of irrelevance of a headline, story or interview. The new bully boys of Australia are not symbolised by the baton held in the policeman's hand or the prison officer's uniform - they

are, instead, the swaggering, -opinionated Media "Stars" who trample before them, almost randomly, both that which is good and bad about Australian society.

And so to political protest. Although the right to protest has long been enshrined as an important right of democratic societies it is not necessarily accepted by all sections of the media as being a fundamental principle of contemporary Australian society. It is not suggested that the media indulges in a deliberate policy of censorship. Instead, what is suggested is that protest incidents are often over-represented but in a way which presents the protester as a "deviant" and protest activity as "deviant" behaviour.

The media is continually involved in resolving a contradiction. You see, on the one hand, it is deviant behaviour that is highly newsworthy and therefore the tendency to over-report. On the other hand, this deviant behaviour - whether it be protest activity, illegal drug taking or homosexuality - violates the idea of what is normal. The media, and its representatives don't want to be seen to be supporting such unpopular or illicit causes. Constant attention paid to these issues always threatens to redefine in the public mind the concept of normality itself. The way in which the media often resolves this contradiction is by condemnation of the particular form of "deviance" reported.

British sociologist Jock Young has argued persuasively that the way in which the media reports deviant behaviour exercises a powerful form of social control. In Young's words:

"The mass media have discovered that people read avidly news which titillates their sensibilities and confirms their prejudices. The ethos of 'giving the public what it wants' involves a constant play on the normative worries of large segments of the population ... Moral indignation, if first galvanised by the newspaper and then resolved in a just fashion, makes a fine basis for newspaper readership."(4)

In effect, this is exactly what has happened in at least one Australian state, in terms of the media's coverage of protest activity. In Queensland, where there has been a strong history of civil rights protest movements, sections of the media have given credence to Young's thesis.

An understanding of how this process works begins by first recognising that the state has one of the most centralised media networks in the western world. Queensland relies heavily on the Queensland Newspapers Group for its information about political affairs as well as protest activity. Queensland Newspapers, which monopolises the mass media (until the advent of Rupert Murdoch's Daily Sun in August 1982), owned

Queensland's only major daily newspaper, the Courier Mail. This media group also owns the only afternoon newspaper, the Telegraph, as well as the Sunday Mail, television station BT07 and radio station ABE. Therefore, the long established daily, the only afternoon newspaper, one of the three commercial television stations, and one of the five commercial AM radio stations are owned by the one group.

Historian Dr Ross Fitzgerald has pointed out that the news rooms of all Queensland's commercial television and radio stations, when compared to their southern counterparts, are small and rely heavily on Australian Associated Press (AAP) for news items, as of course do the regional media.(5) In this regard it is interesting to note that Australian Associated Press is itself based in the Queensland Newspapers building at Bowen Bills in Brisbane, and obtains many of its stories from Queensland-News papers.

The point here is that, as Fitzgerald again points out, what Queensland Newspapers reports or misreports has wide repercussions in the Queensland media (6) Because of the importance of the Courier Mail in setting the agenda for news stories, both the local ABC television news as well as the commercial news and current affairs programs often follow the priorities established by that Paper.

Journalist and academic John Wallace in an analysis relating the monopoly control of the media to the way in which Queensland journalists do their job has made a very critical assessment of the Queensland media generally.

The real story could well be that the Queensland news media, collectively, has failed to play a politically responsible role; that it has failed to take responsibility for the quality control of the news it publishes; that it has left itself open to manipulation by well positioned sources and public relations personnel and, most importantly of all, that Queensland journalists have minimal awareness of this. (7)

There certainly has been an improvement in Queensland Newspapers since 1980 as a result of Harry Gordon's influence and then that of David Smith. But, as we will see, there have been many examples where protest activity has still been presented in a most biased manner.

The other matter relating to the management of news in Queensland is that a small corps of full-time political reporters in Queensland are persuaded to "keep in line" by a system of staggered news releases and access to travel with the Premier. Regular news conferences are often held in the executive building for television reporters and selected print reporters are invited to visit the Premier's office for

special briefings. (8) Clearly, those journalists who are fortunate enough to attend these special briefings are enabled to "scoop" stories not available to those not invited. Because of this situation there is an insidious pressure on journalists to present material favourable to the Queensland Government so that they can maintain regular and easy access to the Premier.

So much for the media side of the equation. When we look at public protest, at least in Queensland,- it is quite clear that the state has had a turbulent history. The policies of the current government towards protest and public assembly are designed to ensure that persons are forced to break the law and risk arrest in order to demonstrate their views on political issues. What lawyer Peter Applegarth has called the government "policies of the paddy wagon"(9) seek to promote a strong image for the government and to deny the government's extra-parliamentary opposition a forum for dissent.

Sir Bjelke-Petersen found very early on in his reign that the Springbok football tour of Queensland and the associated state of emergency that was subsequently called became a strong electoral winner. The Merthyr and Maryborough bi-elections of 24 July 1971 were clearly an endorsement of the government's policy of dealing with protesters in authoritarian ways.

In the 1970s, a series of protest marches by civil rights advocates requesting changes in the Traffic Act legalising peaceful processions led to a government amendment to legislation. This amendment effectively substituted a right of appeal to the Police Commissioner for the previous more democratic procedure of the right of appeal to the courts. Two weeks prior to this legislation the 'Premier announced that: "The day of the political street march is over ... don't bother to apply for a permit. You won't get one, that's government policy now." (10)

Of course, the day of the political street march was far from over. A loose coalition of anti-nuclear, church, student, trade union and other groups directly confronted the ban and were met by, at times, hundreds of policemen determined to enforce the Premier's philosophy. Mass arrests, numbering some thousands in the past few years, have resulted and no one in Queensland has any doubts that the Premier is determined to use his police force to uphold his philosophy on the street march issue. In fact, any analysis of the period in Queensland between 1970 and 1986 would indicate that the government shows extraordinary hostility towards a political principle - the right to protest - which is regarded as fundamental in most Western democracies.

Between 30 June 1977 and August 1979 when the anti-nuclear movement obtained a permit for a march on Nagasaki Day over 2,000 people were arrested and, in many cases, incarcerated for substantive periods of time, in defence of the traditional right to peaceful assembly. Applegarth notes that any philosophy towards public protests can be discerned from the insensitive suppression by the government of the protest movement.

This philosophy supports very strongly the belief that protest is contrary to democracy because, according to the government, democracy begins and ends with the casting of a vote at regular general elections. In addition, protest is seen as an affront to the majority, therefore, one has no right to protest. Finally, the government's philosophies suggest that the streets are not the place for making public protests over political issues because the only acceptable use of roads would be for normal car and pedestrian traffic,

It is difficult not to escape the conclusion that a low priority is accorded by the Bjelke-Petersen Government to civil liberty reforms in a wide range of areas from public protest through to anti-discrimination laws. It is also clear that a low priority has been given to these areas partly because few Queenslanders wish to participate in a protest movement or to exercise other forms of civil rights. With the public behind them the Queensland Government has felt free to belittle the importance of civil liberties in the state and has little impetus to do otherwise.

#### The Media and Protest

Although there are some notable exceptions to the general principle it is fair to say that large sections of the media have concurred with the government's view of protest activity. (12) Whether it be the presentation of individuals exercising peaceful forms of dissent in city streets or the symbols and images conveyed of persons seeking an alternative lifestyle (in communes, for example), the media have generally presented these activities and persons in an unfavourable light. Both in the electronic and the print media emphasis is always put on the minority status of individuals and their causes; protesters are usually depicted as dirty and unkempt; pejorative phrases such as "a well known radical" and "a leading communist" are often used to describe leaders of protest movements.

Some examples from the Murdoch Press during the anti-uranium protests in the late 1970's include:

"Any attempt by the Federal Government to weed out the scruffy, radical stirrers who enjoy an opportunity for a

bloody confrontation with the police will be welcomed by the vast majority of Australians. ... The behaviour of those stone-throwing, foul-mouthed ratbags is abhorrent to all fair-minded Australians who have a gut full of their wild public antics." (Daily Mirror, September 4, 1977.)

"The greening - or more accurately bleeding - of Melbourne's streets has as much to do with the problem of urban boredom as it has to do with genuine political concern."

(The Australian, August 20, 1977.)

"The preparation of a report on a gang of professional demonstrators can hardly be branded as "spying", particularly when there is so much at stake for Australia's future." (Daily Mirror, September 1, 1977.)

Pictures accompanying many media reports often distort the nature of what is happening. The New Journalist gives an example of a picture in The Australian showing a protester screaming defiance at the Prime Minister during a demonstration. The New Journalist points out that witnesses suggest that the protester was, in reality, screaming in pain as police rammed barricades into the stomachs of those protesting.

(New Journalist, April, 1978, p.13.)

The electronic media have also emphasised the violent and aggressive tone of Protest marches. Visual material titillating the sensibilities of the community and confirming their prejudice is often shown in order to, in Young's words, "give the public what it wants". Moral 'indignation, often engaged in by news-readers or current affairs presenters themselves, crystallises the moral indignation of a public already unsympathetic to the views of minority and protest groups.

To be sure, there are exceptions to this rule. Occasionally editorials in newspapers and some individual commentators on television or radio point out that the violence resulting from a demonstration is often the result of police over-reaction. But the underlying media presentation of protest movement is essentially nearly always on the action that occurs in street marches or the confrontation that arises when police arrest marchers. Most of the media have been most unwilling to explain the substantive matters that lie behind the issue of civil rights marches and rarely tackle the more ideological issue of the role of protest movements in jurisdictions that blandly call themselves democracies. In short, exaggeration, titillation, confrontation and the emphasis on the specific issue rather than on the general principles underlying the

protest or dissent movement are the hallmarks of the media's coverage of the civil right issues that have dominated the state in the last two decades.

An example of press overreaction to protest activity in Queensland can be seen by the Courier Mail's coverage of the decision of the University of Queensland's Senate to award the degree of Doctor of Laws to the Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Opposition to the Senate move was widely expressed and reported in the media in the period leading up to .10 May 1985, the date when the degree was to be awarded.

The degree confirming ceremony was due to start at 6.00 pm. From 4.00 pm some 3,000 people gathered to listen to speeches about the academic implications of awarding the degree to the Premier, display placards, watch street theatre and otherwise engage in non-violent protests. Given the Premier's history of strong opposition to civil rights generally and protest activity specifically, it is not unnatural that passions amongst many of the 3,000 people gathered at the university grounds- would be very high.

However, it is important to emphasise that the vast majority of the 3,000 persons present behaved peacefully - indeed, most of the people present had specifically voted against disruptive tactics. In the Courier Mail report on the ceremony which appeared the next day, the front page headlines were, "Thousands in wild protest ... uni writers jeer, spit at Governor", and the opening paragraph read, "Thousands of angry protesters chanted and spat at the Governor, Sir James Ramsay, as he arrived to receive an honorary doctorate of law at Queensland University last night". The rest of the front page dealt with the disorderly demonstration and was illustrated with the picture of broken glass.(13)

The University of Queensland Academic Staff Association complained to the Press Council concerning the presentation of the Courier Mail. As the Press Council noted the incorrect headline and opening paragraph, coupled with the lack of any reference to the peaceful demonstration had the effect of tarring all the demonstrators with the same brush:.(14) The Press Council upheld the complaint of UQASA on the basis that "the combination of the admittedly faulty headline and opening sentence of page 1, together with the photographs on page 3 and the failure to draw any distinction between those involved in the disorderly demonstration and those who conducted a peaceful protest over some hours, created the wrong impression that all the protesters were involved in the disorder". (15)

It is important to note that the Press Council made the point in their finding that the right of peaceful protest is an important feature of a democracy, and to lump those who



practice such forms of dissent together with violent protesters is not only unfair but against the public interest. The Press Council also correctly pointed out that it would be also against the public interest if people came to believe that violent protest is the only form of dissent which would attract the attention of the media. (16) As one, who considers herself a peaceful yet "veteran" protester from Queensland, told me:

There are no other avenues, letters to the editor don't get published ... you feel you've got a right to express your views ... Then you're out on the streets surrounded by a sea of blue uniforms, and no one is listening to you ... so you are forced to get violent to be noticed.

Similar complaints by two individuals relating to coverage in the other Brisbane morning newspaper, The Daily Sun, were also upheld and the Press Council argued along the same lines in their judgement.

It is not my intention to suggest that the Courier Mail and the Daily Sun are necessarily less objective in the reporting of protest activities of this sort from other Australian morning newspapers. However, the report of the degree conferring ceremony indicates that in Queensland the media coverage of protest activity is not as balanced and impartial as it should be. This point is particularly important because, of all the states and territories in Australia, the Queensland Government has single-mindedly shown itself to be antagonistic to the 'ideology of civil rights movements. If the media do not endorse the legitimate right of Citizens to make peaceful protests and if they report the protest activities that do occur in a manner that suggests demonstrator-initiated violence, then the community at large has little reason but to endorse the government's view of protesting and protesters as "deviant" activity conducted by "deviant" persons.

The example given here is just the most recent one of a long line of examples where the Queensland media have portrayed protesters as a rabble of long-haired hooligans. The New Journalist in 1978 recounts the example of a 1977 demonstration where 1000 demonstrators gathered in the City Square for a civil liberties rally sponsored by the Queensland Trades and Labor Council. (17)

According to the New Journalist a Special Branch' Officer, mistaken for a demonstrator by the police, received injuries while struggling with police. On the front page of the Sunday Mail the following day it was reported that the detective was injured after a "soft drink can was pushed into his face." (18)

The general tone of the Sunday Mail report was one which basically excused the police for the violence that erupted and made no mention of the fact that the police "abused, threatened, jostled and punched Australian Journalists Association members trying to record what was going on".

More recently, clashes between demonstrators, supporting sacked power workers and police outside the locked gates of Brisbane's Parliament House were reported by the Courier Mail without any hint of the ironies inherent in the situation. As an accurate report in the Sydney Morning Herald pointed out this demonstration coincided with the ceremonial opening of the New Parliament by the new Governor, Sir Walter Campbell, who was a left-winger in his university days". The Courier Mail's coverage of the event ignored the paradox of demonstrators being hauled off into paddy wagons by police during Sir Walter's speech, which included such homilies as, "this progressive state of ours" and, "in a free and democratic society, diversity is strength".

Clearly, the press has the right to report violent occurrences that may happen during the course of a demonstration. Clearly also, editorial opinion can take whatever position it wants to on protest activity. However, I do believe that the media have professional responsibility to attempt, to get beyond the specific incidents that occur at demonstrations and to present a broader ideological and historical report on the context in which the incidents arose.

#### Conclusion

There are no easy answers to the question of how the media can improve their performance in reporting protest activity. A start could be made by assessing in objective terms the manner in which the community see the media's coverage of protest activity. A thorough content analysis of media coverage, together with a public opinion survey on how the community reacts to this coverage, is badly needed.

Secondly, there are very few examples in Australia where protest activities have blown up to full scale riots such as those that have occurred amongst British soccer fans. However, the antipodean situation is not likely to remain as quiescent for much longer. The role of the media in accelerating the process by which a peaceful protest activity turns into a full scale riot could be analysed in countries where this has occurred so that we have some idea here on how the media can act responsibly in this matter.

It is inevitable though that forces within the media will ensure that issues of protest and dissent are trivialised in the future. In the electronic media particularly, the

personality cult associated with "talking heads" - comperes, news reporters and front persons generally will ensure that style rather than substance dominates the way in which radio and television present issues of dissent. And, by providing ever increasing amusement and ever decreasing information, civil liberty issues will, with some of the print media at least, continue to be trivialised. The consequences of this, however, will be that when minorities feel as though they are not listened to either by governments or by the press, anger can boil over to frustration which can then slide very easily into violence and aggression.

I would hope that the media itself would begin once again to embrace the concept of pluralism as a working philosophy for reporting news.

However, if I am reading the community correctly, many persons, some of them in the media themselves, have lost faith in a libertarian pluralistic society. They are embracing a philosophy that is called "social responsibility" with its directive and prescriptive overtones emphasising normality, conservatism, material growth and cultural blandness. Sections of the Australian media promulgating this philosophy demonstrate an intolerance towards people whose views are different and behaviour that is unorthodox. The conservative resurgence in this is very real - policemen, "law and order" politicians and "family" spokespersons are gaining increasing credence in the 1980s. Personal dissent, peaceful and legitimate protest on civil rights questions, a questioning concerning the orthodoxy of economic "growth" for growth's sake, hold little currency with both the media and those who govern us.

But in a democracy, protest and dissent, deviance and deviants, and debate and criticism are, if peaceful, all legitimate means to achieving a more creative and dynamic society. Titillation, moral indignation and the trivialisation of these events may well always be hallmarks of some media reporting. Let us hope though that there are at least some reporters who will get beyond the superficial reporting of an alternative way of analysing the world and present their readers and viewers with a contextual and deeper, analysis of what the alternative ways of looking at the world are. What better place to start than in the reporting of protest and dissent activity, especially that activity which occurs in the State of Queensland.

#### NOTES

- T. Molomby, Media's Responsibility For Falr Trial.

Paper presented to a conference on The Jury, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, May 1986.

2. *ibid*, p. 2.

3. *Ibid*, P.3.

4. J. Young, in S. Cohen and J. Young, *The Manufacturers of News: Deviance. Social Problems and the Mass Media*, Constable, London, 1973, p. 316.

5. R. Fitzgerald, *From,1915 to the Early 1980's: A History of Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984, p. 600.

6. *ibid*, p. 600.

7. J. Wallace, "Reporting the Joh Show: The Queensland Media", in *Politics in Oueensland*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1980, pp. 203-204.

8. R. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 601.

9. P. Applegarth, *Civil Liberties*, in A. Patience (ed), *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, p. 147.r162.

10. *Courier Mail*, 5 September 1977.

11. P. Applegarth, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

12. This account is taken from the Australian Press Council's adjudication (No. 262) on the events. See APC adjudication 262, 2nd Dec. 1985.

13. *ibid*, p. 2.

14. *ibis]*, P. 3.

15. *ilia*, P. 3.

16. 1120, P. 3. 17 *The New Journalist*, April, 1978, pp. 12-14.

18. *ibid*, p.13.

19. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 1985.