

FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MEDIA

Opening address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the University of Canberra Faculty of Communication Conference on Media Images of Asia/Australia: Cross Cultural Reflections, 27 November 1992.

You will no doubt recall that Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787 that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter". Well, there have been occasions during my time as Foreign Minister when I have been inclined to concede that I'm no Thomas Jefferson ... And I'm not sure Jefferson would have been either had he lived in this part of the world 200 years later. He might well have been tempted to say, as Tom Stoppard once put it, "I'm with you on the free press. It's the newspapers I can't stand".

I don't intend to make this occasion a media-bashing exercise. That would not, in fact, reflect my view of the media's role in our region and its relationship with foreign policy making - not to mention my view of it at this stage in the electoral cycle! But, as this is a Faculty of Communication conference, and as there are no doubt some budding journalists in the audience, you'll perhaps forgive me on occasion slipping into the role of Devil's Advocate.

Before doing so, let me immediately say that in terms of coverage and analysis of world issues by the media, Australia is as well, and probably better, served than most countries. Despite the far greater resources available to the media in the United States, I think that in the scope of international affairs coverage, Australia probably does better. It is certainly possible on most days of the week to pick up any one of the three big daily broadsheet newspapers in Australia (I do not wish to omit the Financial Review, but it has a slightly different role) and get very reasonable coverage of what is happening around the world. The Australian, in particular, has recently been putting a lot of additional resources into its international coverage, and it shows.

There are at present, not least on the ABC and SBS, a number of really quite excellent current affairs programs and documentaries which delve regularly into foreign topics, and give a markedly less xenophobic view of the world than can be found in many countries. There is certainly an increasing focus by just about all the media on the Asian region. And there have been some very useful contributions to the current trade debate, and the more general discussion of our place in Asia, by some individual sections of it.

But that's not the whole story. In a speech to the National Press Club last year - at the time

of the launching of the book I wrote with Bruce Grant on Australia's Foreign Relations, my own effort to contribute to informed public debate on foreign affairs - I made some comments about the media's role: although I don't think those comments were overly harsh or condemnatory of the media as a whole, I did receive something of a mixed reception from the journalists present.

I said then that, in general, I did not believe the quality of debate on foreign policy in this country was high enough, and that the media had to take some responsibility for that. I saw it as still the case that most widely read or watched journalists only became interested in foreign affairs issues when they got caught up in domestic partisan politics, had some strong personality component, or were perceived to involve either a grovel or a squabble - a row or a kowtow. Another trait which sometimes appears is the tendency to undersell contributions this country can make internationally - to ridicule and treat as "strutting the stage" any effort to make an impact on regional or world affairs.

I do not want to treat journalists as a single mass, any more than I would ever treat Asia as a single mass, and I know that there are many who would agree with at least part of what I have just said. It should also be said that these traits, to the extent that they do exist, are not journalist-specific. They are, I believe, part of a broader phenomenon in the Australian community, although one that I hope is slowly disappearing. In fact the quality media I have spoken of probably have been at the leading edge in helping to change some of those less edifying characteristics of the Australian psyche. As I said to the Press Club last year, journalists who do have a conviction about the importance of foreign policy and trade issues, and are able to effectively communicate that perception, perform a genuine service to Australian decision-makers and publics who have too often failed to fully appreciate what is going on around us, how it impacts on us and what we might be able to do in response.

G. K. Chesterton, in the Wisdom of Father Brown, described journalism as consisting largely of "saying 'Lord Jones Dead' to people who never knew Lord Jones was alive". I know it is not always easy to get past editors, chiefs of staff and sub editors who may not share the same perceptions as to what is important. But it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that the entirely legitimate role of the media as "entertainer" should not wholly overshadow its role as "educator".

If it is appropriate that Australia should be rethinking and redefining its place in the world - as I think it is, in the context of all the global change swirling around us - then it is also appropriate that the media accept some responsibility in helping that process along. When the question is asked as to how you instil a feeling of "belonging" to the region in the hearts of 17 million people; how you make a country feel at home in a region where demographically, historically and culturally we are always going to be a little distinctive; how you make an entire population feel comfortable with its neighbours - the media has to be part of the answer.

I said in a speech to the Australia Council last year that to gain a place in the thinking of our neighbours and to feel an empathy with them, it was essential to work as much in the concert halls, universities and sporting fields of Asia as in the more traditional areas of government diplomacy. And so too with the media. Of course the role and responsibility of the media is different to that of governments. But the media does have a part to play, even if it is only alerting the public to what is going on. And with the advent of 24-hour television, almost instant wire service reports and generally much faster communications, I think we all have to accept that the media itself is more often becoming part of the story, and more able to influence it while it happens rather than just tell it. With this new power the media must accept new responsibility.

The question I keep coming back to - and it is one those in the media should keep on asking themselves - is whether the media isn't just congenitally a little too negative, a little too sceptical, about governments' intentions and policies.

One of the strongest arguments I have seen to this effect (maybe a little too strong, but it's worth recounting nonetheless) was spelt out recently in the US magazine Dialogue by Ted J. Smith III, Professor of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University (a quintessential American name and title if ever I have heard one!). Professor Smith argues that, over the past few decades, journalists in the United States have begun to perceive their role as not merely to serve society by providing an accurate account of the conflict of ideas, but to "save and perfect it". He identifies this new "calling" as involving the notion that the "primary duty of the journalist is to focus attention on problems and deficiencies, failures and threats". He goes on to suggest that it is "cynical, sometimes apocalyptic negativism that permeates the daily news", adding that "For those committed to constant scepticism ... judgement is preordained: the object is flawed and criticism is reduced to an enumeration of defects."

While nobody would suggest that journalists exist only to provide an account of ideas generated by others - they are, after all, people with ideas like anyone else and entitled to express them - I think there is at least some force to the point being made, especially the distortion inherent in this negativism. As Smith puts it,

This constant emphasis on bad news over good - which most journalists readily acknowledge - denies the public the range of information it needs to guide its decisions. Thus the cost of adopting the role of neutral critic is that the press can no longer adequately discharge its more fundamental task of ensuring an informed electorate.

There is also some legitimacy to his further suggestion that the autonomy of the press has allowed journalists the "luxury of being irresponsible" - in the sense that the press has

emerged as a kind of permanent parliamentary opposition, but one feeling no particular need to defend its position or, in particular, offer any reasonable alternatives to the policies and actions it attacks.

The conduct of good foreign policy in the region, and the existence of a free and active Australian media, are obviously not mutually exclusive: for at least parts of our history we have had both, and we are all still here. There have, of course, been occasions when the two have come into conflict over the past few years - the notorious 1986 David Jenkins article in The Sydney Morning Herald, and the more recent ABC Embassy series (although this involved fiction rather than reported), are two obvious examples.

I think the best way of avoiding these kinds of problems occurring in any major way in the future is simply to develop more "ballast" in the media's reporting of Australia's relations with the Asian region - more weight, more complexity and more subtlety. Then the items that will inevitably arouse indignation from time to time will at least be seen against a more serious and substantial context.

An interesting case study in this issue was the way in which the Australian media reported - or, more accurately, generally misreported - the actions taken by me and the Government once the screening of the Embassy television series had become a bilateral issue between Australia and Malaysia. There was very little reference in the Australian media to the complexity of that issue or the potentially much greater damage it could have done to the Australia-Malaysia relationship if the Government had not found some way of defusing the situation. Instead, media reporting concentrated on what journalists perceived to be an "apology" and a "grovel" offered by the Government. The precise wording of what was actually said by me was very carefully calibrated to go no further than was necessary to deal with a very delicate situation, and certainly not to concede ground on any question of principle. But the detail and the subtlety were almost totally lost in transmission - drowned in a thunder of commentary. I have to say that, by contrast, the reporting of the crisis associated with the release of the film Turtle Beach just a year or so later, was generally much more fairly and intelligently balanced.

As Foreign Minister, I certainly would not want the media to curtail its activities in the region: on the contrary, I would like it to become even more active. Happily that increased engagement is occurring - in some sections of the media about the same pace as in the government, business and educational community, and in others a little ahead. There are many examples of increasing sophistication and breadth in the Australian media's coverage of regional issues.

I would hope that my strong support for the ABC's plans to broadcast an Australian television service into Asia establishes beyond doubt my own credentials as an advocate of active media involvement in the region. For an Australian Foreign Minister to support

such an initiative undoubtedly seemed to some an act of folly. It may be that the ABC's initiative will cause the Australian Government some difficulties down the track, but I think it more likely that we will look back in a couple of years on Cabinet's decision to support the plan as a major foreign policy as well as commercial achievement, helping to forge, project and consolidate an Australian identity as an informed, active and involved regional player.

The provision of a distinctively Australian television service into the Asia Pacific, with an Asia Pacific news focus and an emphasis in its programming on showcasing Australian culture - both popular and otherwise - and economic achievement, has the potential to do more in 12 months to create an "awareness" of Australia in the region than years of the sort of cultural diplomacy my Department and others are presently engaged in. ABC international television will compete in a market already well penetrated by CNN and the BBC and, apart from the benefits which should accrue from Australian companies being able to advertise on the service, it should assist greatly in increasing the exposure Australia gets at the popular level in the region. Anyone who doubts the potential of Australian generated programming to do this should consider the gigantic following the series Return to Eden enjoyed in Indonesia.

The power of the media to project positive and well-informed national images - and to help develop and convey a sense of regional identity - is very well recognised by the Australian Government. We have attempted to give direct assistance to journalists wishing to know more about the region, and to Asian journalists wishing to know more about Australia, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Overseas Media Visits program, the various bilateral Councils, Foundations and Institutes now housed in the Department, and through direct sponsorship of Australian journalists to travel to Asia Pacific countries.

In the past 12 months, for example, the Overseas Media Visits program has assisted 70 journalists coming to Australia, about half of whom were given funding as well as help in arranging briefings and itineraries. These journalists in the past 12 months have come from Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. In addition, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides grants to about 16 Australian journalists each year to undertake familiarisation visits to Asia Pacific countries.

In international relations as in so many other areas of endeavour image is important. Foreign policy is and must be driven by national interest, but perceptions of a country, both at home and abroad, do play an important part in the capacity of that country to pursue its permanent interests. Reducing cultural distance, making Australia better known, and ensuring that we ourselves know and feel more about the nations with which we trade and live, are all crucial to our capacity to defend and advance our political, economic and other interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

The media has a big role to play in all these respects. As communications technology moves ever faster, the reach and projection capacity of all the media expands with it. All this means that responsibility of the media to be clear-headed about the issues involved becomes ever more important. The media has always been influential, but how it chooses to exercise that influence in the future will matter more than it has ever done to the future of our nation.

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