

FOURTH SUMMER SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL
JOURNALISM



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Theme : "COMMUNICATION - KEY TO GOOD GOVERNMENT"

Opening Speech by the Prime Minister, the Hon. John Gorton

Mr Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen:

There are perhaps three things I ought to say to you before I really get launched into opening this Conference:

The first one is that I have spent a great deal of time over the last two or three years in opening things like science blocks and things like technical schools and things of that kind generally, and it has been an experience of mine that at the end of having delivered the address that always goes along with these activities, one is so delighted to have got through, one is so relieved at having finished, that one tends to forget entirely to open whatever it is that one came to open. If this should happen on this occasion, would you please remember that at the very beginning I indicated that the object of this was to open the conference, and just take it as read if I forget, which I hope I won't.

The second thing that I would say to you is that I understood that tonight this was not a "heavy" night, this was not a night of real work for you such as will occur when people read you the carefully-prepared papers on various aspects of communications which you will then, in the course of the seminar, discuss and dissect and agree with or disagree with. This was, as far as I was concerned, more an opportunity to come along to speak for perhaps twenty minutes or so, not deeply, but as a mark of respect for the work which you do - I won't say for each one of you - but for the work you do, and perhaps to put forward some few views of my own on its importance.

The keynote of this, I gather, is "Communication - the Key to Good Government"; this is what the seminar is about. I don't know that this is a sufficiently accurate title because of things which I will now endeavour to develop.

It is possible to have good government without communication, but it is far less likely that there will be good government without communication, but of course it is possible to have very bad government with very efficient communication. You will remember that one of the first things which any totalitarian government seeks to do, whether it be of the right or of the left, is to control communications, and having controlled communications, having controlled the media of the press and television and broadcasting, then the most lavish technical facilities can be poured into communications so that they will permeate the whole of a society and will allow only those views and only those arguments which a government in power wishes to allow, and that they will suppress all dissident opinion and prevent views which the government in power does not wish to have presented.

Well, then, you can have and have had examples of communication, but they haven't been the key to good government because they haven't been uncontrolled communications. So I would define a little bit the theme of this

conference and say - and I may even be a little wrong in this - perhaps we should say - "Free Communications: The Best Insurance Policy to See that Good Government Continues", and with that I would have no quarrel whatsoever, an insurance policy to see that it continues.

I did query a little the suggestion - uncontrolled communications - because there is a tendency, or it seems to me that there is occasionally a tendency for a certain lack of control in communications, just as it seems to some of those who don't agree with me politically on occasions, that there is a certain lack of control. I am not speaking now of the reporting of political matters, but there are some papers which, of course, one wouldn't dare to name, but there are some papers who occasionally tend to be verging on the uncontrolled, particularly when they make the best of both worlds by taking a high moral line on how extremely bad vice and violence and things of that kind are, and in order to drive home the point of how bad they are, they fill half their pages with careful reporting of the particular things. This of course, I am sure, on the behalf of the owners is designed to attain a moral end! But occasionally it might seem to be verging just a little on the uncontrolled, so that is why I chose the word "free".

Well, how are we going to get free communications, and how ought those free communications to be used by you, because there is a responsibility on government to see that information is supplied to enable free communication properly to function, and there is a responsibility on journalists and on the owners of newspapers and on the editors of newspapers, and, not particularly, but also on those who write the headlines for stories and cut out the middle of the story from the people who wrote them, there is a responsibility on them to see that that information is properly presented in a balanced way.

Well what is the responsibility on government? I think it is pretty heavy. I believe that governments ought never to seek to suppress news or information, whether those governments feel it is for the moment to their advantage to do it or not to their advantage to do it. I not only believe that this is useful to enable free communication to function but I believe it is a sensible policy and one which is to the advantage of the government which uses it.

Now, I remember my present Press Officer joining me when I was first in the Navy and we put this to the test. It's a long while ago now and you won't remember, but we had two naval ships steaming along, one of which was firing at the other with such good effect that it hit it, and a shell went through it - fortunately, it was a non-explosive one - just above the water line. Well this is an unusual occurrence in a well-run Navy, and the question arose of what one should do about it, so of course what one did about it was immediately call a press conference and tell everybody and send them down there and they could interview everybody and they could see the hole and they could take pictures. After they decided that there it was and there was nothing to hide, okay, the story was there and there was no more speculation. And similarly we did it in other things that happened.

This is not only in my view a proper way but a payable way for a government to behave, and therefore there is not only a responsibility, but if it has got any sense, a government behaves in accordance with that responsibility.

Now there must be some limitations to this. There are some fields of information which are tied up possibly with national security. There are some areas of information which it is not desired to make public for

perhaps another week or so for various reasons because negotiations are going on and haven't reached a point of complete fruition. These kinds of things, where there is a particular reason, I think one is justified in not announcing, and in fencing if one is asked about them. But those are, roughly, the only reservations that I would have.

It is therefore, in my view, the purpose of a Government Information Officer attached to a Minister or to a Department, not to protect his Minister or his Department in the sense of protecting him by stopping the dissemination of information for which his Minister or his Department can be criticised, but rather to protect him - his Minister or his Department - by going along and saying, "This has happened" or "Some newspaper is interested in this".... "These are the facts. These facts ought to be made public"..... and so protect him in that way. Then it is up to the Minister, and if he has got any sense, he will make those facts public.

Before I leave this area of where I think Government responsibility lies, where it should be used, I would like to touch on something which has been a matter of discussion from time to time, and that is the dissemination of information by public servants as opposed to the dissemination of information by governments, by Ministers, by people working as journalists in Departments or for Ministers.

You have all seen it suggested that, really, public servants ought to be able to make pronouncements on policy, ought to be able to make announcements as to fact. I find this impossible to accept. You have public servants who are there to carry out a policy decided on by a government or decided on by their Minister. Quite often, before that policy is decided upon, if it is a properly-run Department, the Head of it, or the second in charge of it or third in charge of it will be talking to the Minister, and he will say, "Look, I don't think you ought to do that. I think you are quite wrong. I think you are an absolute clot if you do this. You shouldn't do it." Sometimes he writes it on a piece of paper and sends it in. Then, again, if it is a properly-run Department, most of the time they are right. But not always, and so a Minister will say, "Well, all right. I have taken into account what you have put to me. I have thought about it carefully. I think you are wrong. I don't accept your advice, and this is the policy I want you to carry out." And in a properly-run Department, then a public servant accepts that and carries it out.

If you had a situation arising out of those sort of circumstances where that public servant would immediately rush away and say publicly, "I think the Government or the Minister is quite wrong. I told him he was wrong at the time, and these are the reasons I put forward to him," well, it would be a very good news story, but it wouldn't be very conducive to good government, and it wouldn't be very conducive to the standing of public servants. One of the safeties that public servants have is that they do carry out a policy, either devised or accepted by their political government, and if mistakes are made in policy or in practice, it is their political government and their political head who takes the blame, even though they may not necessarily directly be responsible, and that they, themselves, as public servants are not to be subject to criticism, because if they are, then they must have a right to answer and it is better that they should follow the course of not entering into public controversy and therefore not being held responsible and attacked in public.

For those reasons, although I know there are arguments on the other side, I do feel that in the discharge of a responsibility to provide

information by a government, that it is the government and not its servants who must accept that responsibility.

Well, what about the responsibility that then devolves on those who work for the communications media, those who take that information, either freely offered or ferreted out and then disseminated through the country? This is of vital importance, of just as much importance, of just as much responsibility as lies upon a government to make the information available.

I don't speak only of information as to fact. That is fairly simple. Almost any course that is adopted in a country such as ours is a course which is arrived at as a matter of choice. There are a number of things a government can do, and there are quite valid arguments in favour of all those things. If you walked up on to a hill here in Canberra, and you looked down from Red Hill, and you saw spread below you the myriad twinkling lights of this city, and you said to yourself, "Each one of those lights, or nearly every one of those lights is a light in the window of a house where an Australian family lives. What do they want?" You would have to answer yourself in this way. They would want to have a perfect system of education; they would want to have a system of defence which would make this country so strong that not even a major power would attack it; they would want to have development proceeding apace not only in the country but in the city; they would want to have x per cent of GNP spent on providing scientific advancement; they would want the States and the Commonwealth each to be able to do all that they feel that they would like to do; they would want taxation to be reduced. They would not want a deficit because with a deficit there tends to be too much inflation. In fact they want everything which is quite reasonable because as individuals we would all like to have all these things we would want to have too. But you can't have it all and neither can a country, so in spite of the fact that valid arguments can be made for every one of these and a myriad other things, you come down to making a choice - priority - which is the most important, which of things that are needed shall we take.

Then it is necessary to explain, for a government to explain why they regard these things as the ones of most importance. What arguments have led them to say, "Well, we'll take this field rather than that at the moment. We will defer this until some other time". There will always be arguments for and arguments against, and it is essential for a well-informed community, a community that can make a proper judgment on whether to retain or dismiss the government, that these arguments should be presented first by a government and then presented in a balanced way by the communications media throughout Australia. If they do that, if they don't make a snap judgment, if they don't make a biased judgment - criticise of course - but present the arguments for and against - say "These are the arguments which are advanced for it; these are the arguments which are advanced against it", then whether we are individuals writing a column or whether we are a newspaper or whether we are broadcasters, we say we don't agree with what is being done for these reasons, at least the debate has become public, and become public in a way which enables a democracy to form an informed judgment. This is the ultimate test of whether you gentlemen and ladies are doing your work properly: That an informed judgment can be formed by the public.

Well, I know the immense difficulties that you are under in doing this, particularly those who work for newspapers. You have a deadline for one thing. I have always believed, I have been told it is true, I don't

know; you can inform me if it isn't; that one of the cries of the editors of all major newspapers is : "You've got to get it on by a certain time; you've got to get it into to us by five o'clock. If you can get it right, but if you can't get it right, at least get it written". That, I think, shows up, necessarily shows up because there isn't time. This is a difficulty which one understands. It seems to me there are also difficulties some times with those who happen to own newspapers because they happen to have particular beliefs in one way or in another and they may be prepared to publish matter which supports the particular beliefs or policies which their paper is at the moment advancing, and not report anything which isn't supporting that or at least slant it one way or another. This is, I think, a bad thing. I am not saying this is on any one particular side of politics. It isn't. It is on both sides, but I do think it is not a proper use of communications.

I am not so disturbed about it really, because if it goes on long enough, then people say, "All right, that paper, X, we know what it is like, what line it is going to take on any particular matter. That paper, Y, we know what line it is going to take on any particular matter" and it doesn't have a very great effect on forming public opinion. But that is another difficulty that you, as working journalists, have to overcome. You can overcome it, even when the unforgiving minute doesn't allow you to devote all the time and all the arguments that are necessary on a particular matter. There are always special articles that can be written if your editor can provide you with the space. There are special talks which can be made over broadcasting networks, There are a number of smaller publications in which these things can be discussed in a more leisurely way, weekly publications and things of that kind. And so the way is there though it may be difficult.

However difficult it may be, it is necessary if we are properly to use the media of communications, for a government to do what I have said it ought to do, and for those who then take that information to use it or to attempt to use it in the way that I have suggested to you I think it ought to be used.

There is only one other thing, I think, that I wish to say, and that is that though it seems to me it is occasionally being lost sight of today, there is also a need in using the media, particularly the written media properly, for some consideration to be paid to the use of good English. It is not always apparent that this is happening.

I do remember reading in a newspaper - I am not making this up - a story that was written that so-and-so saw Mr Smith "standing there being sick in his underpants". Now, they didn't mean he was being sick in his underpants any more than he was being sick in his hat. What they meant was he was wearing smalls while he was being sick. This may seem a small point, and it is in that particular context! But that lack of complete precision can lead to quite serious misunderstandings from time to time.

The stories in military history where this kind of bad writing has led to disasters are legion. There was the Charge of the Light Brigade, for example. It was a complete mistake and came about because the general at the time used bad English when he wrote the order which was carried down to the Light Brigade. I could go through many other military despatches which were written with such conciseness that they were quite unable to be understood and therefore everybody did the wrong thing. I am not suggesting that you should do that, but I am saying the English language can be a method of expression

which probably embodies the greatest precision of any language since Latin, and I include French. Or it can be a really sloppy sort of language which doesn't really mean anything from which Smith can draw one inference and Jones can draw another.

I really ought to apologise for talking to you so long about this, but it does seem to me that allied with what I said to you - and it is not often I get a chance to tell the Press what they ought to do; it is nearly always the other way round - allied with what I have said to you of the proper use of the media is the really proper use of English. It probably means going back to learning parsing in the schools, but I don't want to get into trouble with the Education Department at the present moment.

Sir, I told you that this address was not one that was going to go deeply into matters, and it doesn't. It was an address designed to indicate the importance which I attach to your deliberations and more particularly to your work and the way in which you carry it out. If I have touched upon some feelings of my own about how a government ought to provide information, how those charged with disseminating it ought to use the information that is used, I have done it because I feel it is of vital importance to the proper running of a democracy. It is easy enough for a political party - and indeed we all tend to do it in the House - to argue to a brief, to put forward only the good points in favour of some course, and to ignore the bad, not mention them or try and pretend they don't exist. I hope that this will not grow in the political field. I hope it won't take root at all in those who disseminate it, because it is essential when cases are put, all the good points in favour of it should be put and all the bad points against it should be put if a balanced judgment is to be made.

You are the people who will enable a balanced judgment to be made by the community. It is a heavy responsibility and I am sure you will discharge it well.

I declare this open.
