



**PRIME MINISTER**

FOR PRESS

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TEXT OF ADDRESS MADE BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE CANBERRA  
TIMES 50TH ANNIVERSARY LUNCHEON

I am delighted to be here today at a function that helps celebrate the 50th birthday of an old acquaintance.

I have been reading the Canberra Times for around 21 years. That is what happens when people come to Canberra as politicians - they have to read the Canberra Times. It is almost the golden rule.

I must confess that over the years the Canberra Times news and comment pages have filled me with a variety of emotions. They still do.

There is not a politician alive who will admit that his only real enjoyment left in life is waiting for the morning newspapers to arrive. Newspapers are not meant to make politicians happy.

In many ways, a newspaper is the single most important institution in a community. It symbolises so many other things and if it were not for newspapers, so many other things that are important would also not exist in our community. Newspapers are vehicles that inform, enlighten, entertain, and often act as a social and political conscience.

For 50 years, the Canberra Times has played just this traditional role, and it has played it well. But of course its influence has been felt far beyond the geographical boundaries of the National Capital.

By its very nature, the newspaper of any political capital has influence far wider than other locally circulated newspapers.

It not only has the ability to report the political events of the day, it has the unique capacity to report the people - the politicians, the advisers, the public servants - behind the great events. The Canberra Times is certainly no exception.

It does have a special behind the scenes insight into the workings of Australia's National Capital. It is in a better position to have that insight than others which have quarters in other cities. That is why it's required reading for politicians and that is why its influence is considerable.

This occasion is appropriate for me to briefly outline a working politician's view of the press.

As you all know, I have always enjoyed very good relations with the press. Sometimes their relations with me have been a little strained. And as you know - it has never been my fault.

Today, more than ever before, the role of the press and the politician are interwoven.

Because of the size of modern electorates, no politician can hope to make and maintain personal contact with more than a tiny fraction of his constituency. He must rely on the press. An effective press is, therefore, an essential and integral element of democracy.

Of course, the traffic is not all one way.

Some people say we need informed politicians even more than we need an informed public.

Again, the politicians cannot talk personally to all the experts. Only from the press can he obtain a cross section of expert comment, letters to the editor, straws in the wind, and that summary of reflected opinion which derives from the mysterious alchemy of reporter, columnist, and editor.

The role gives the press great power - although perhaps not quite as much as it thinks - and power carries with it great responsibility.

The press has many facets, but the political role of the press can be said to keep the public and the politician informed on matters of public concern. Information goes beyond the bare facts. It extends to informed comment, some projection and a little advance warning.

People in a democracy acknowledge the need for a free press. But there is no such animal as absolute freedom any more for the press than for the citizen. The limits of one freedom always clash with the limits of another freedom - so boundaries have to be drawn.

Likewise, with the press and the politician. Information may be untimely, comment may be premature, and judgement may be incomplete - so there may well be a case for judicious delay or a case for maintaining confidentiality.

This raises a fundamental question. How do you ensure the delay is justified, that confidentiality is really in the public interest - and not just in the interest of the politician or his party?

There is no absolute answer, but time has a habit of catching up with those who break the rules.

There is more than one party, more than one minister, more than one newspaper - so standards of normal behaviour tend to become established and observed.

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As I indicated earlier, in a democratic society there is a close link between responsibilities of politicians and the press. Indeed, in the political field, their respective roles are in a sense complimentary.

The actions and decisions of government are of vital community concern. Although speeches in campaigns and in parliament have their special place, responsibility for informing the nation of these actions and decisions falls largely on the media.

Clearly, then the politician - particularly one holding ministerial office - has a responsibility to keep the press as accurately and fully informed as possible on events that he controls.

Earlier this year - opening the National Press Club - I said that if the Australian electorate is to be able to make valid judgements on government policy it should have the greatest access to information as possible.

The Interdepartmental Committee that reported in December 1974 on proposed freedom of information legislation has been reconvened and has met on a number of occasions.

The task of the Committee is to study and report on proposals for freedom of information legislation,

The Committee has been directed to report as soon as possible.

I hope it doesn't follow entirely some aspects of an act or bill in the United States that many people are now calling the Sunshine Act because I am advised that it will make the operations for certain statutory authorities utterly impossible. Every word and every decision or report of decision would have to be made completely and absolutely covered. One chairman of a noted organisation in the United States, in talking to members of Congress who were promoting the Sunshine legislation, said that it would just make the institution of the government unworkable and then members of Congress are meant to have said that you could even have people to dinner and make decisions there and just record the formal decisions and that would be all you would have to tell us. But he had more character than that and more determination as I am sure many would have here. He said if you pass laws that make the workings of institutions unworkable I am going to carry out the letter of that law absolutely and you as a legislator will then have to bear the responsibility for the institution of being unworthy. The Sunshine Act has not yet seen the early morning sunshine. It is still locked within the confines of Congress.

I have also written to Ministers asking them to review secrecy provisions in legislation for which they are responsible. I want to make it plain that the purpose of this review is to reduce unnecessary secrecy. Of course, such a review would be essential against the background of freedom of information legislation because when such legislation is introduced it could be found that provision of existing legislation would be incompatible with the thrust and purpose of it.

Ministers should be approachable, available, and accessible.

They have not only been requested to make themselves available wherever possible to the media, but also to ensure that their departments make the greatest efforts to supply the public with information.

Ever since I became a politician - and no doubt for many years before - people have spoken and written about the alleged conspiracy on the part of Governments to withhold information from the press. The press are seen as knights in shining armour standing as a guardian of democratic freedom.

Some see the press/politician relationship as a kind of power struggle. They see the politician doing his best to enshroud his actions in secrecy while the reporter uses all his talents and contacts to penetrate the veil.

The results are seen as a sort of political catechism with some things unpublished which ought to be published, and some published which obviously should not be published - sometimes in a garbled and misleading fashion.

While there may occasionally in certain circumstances be an element of truth in this, I do not believe this represents the real situation.

The democratic system is not exempt from the hard realities of practical day by day administration which demands that some reticence, at least, must inevitably be applied to when and how the information is provided.

There are policies which in the making could well be jeopardised if publicised prematurely, or which involve other authorities including governments, local and overseas.

The maintenance of privacy for the individual must also be constantly in mind.

In relationships between governments, confidentiality is also often quite essential - in the interest of frank and truthful communication.

In our own federal system of government, relationships between the states require a degree of confidence that would not apply if every letter between a Premier and Prime Minister were to become public in the joint decision making process.

Also, there are some matters which for security reasons cannot be disclosed long after the event.

The politician has to weigh this against his duty to inform the public of what he is about. This makes for difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions.

I believe that the responsible press understand that there may be good reasons why a minister cannot give information at a particular time.

Having said that, can I again strongly make the point. I want an unhindered flow of information to the media. I want factual information provided, to encourage people to make constructive and useful judgements.

I believe ministers are playing their part. They do recognise this fundamental need to provide factual information - quickly and accurately.

Finally, can I return to the Canberra Times.

In these days, when many great international newspapers and journalists have closed their doors and others are reducing in size because of cost pressures, it is a most significant achievement for a newspaper to celebrate a half century.

This milestone was not reached simply as a matter of course. That it was born in a community with less than 5000 people and within a few years had survived the great depression and other setbacks was due largely to the dedication, enthusiasm and singular optimism of the remarkable Shakespear family.

There is an example of dedication, commitment and determination of which I believe, any organisation and any newspaper and any organisation in the wider field, would be proud.

I understand that an unexpected Government advertisement or a printing order meant the difference between survival, and having to close the doors. On one occasion the winnings from a lucky bet paid an account that could not otherwise have been paid.

As we say in this country, the paper was surviving on the smell of an oil rag - and an indefatigable spirit.

For Mrs Heather Shakespeare this month of celebration must surely bring back vivid memories of a newspaper and a community growing up together.

Mrs Shakespeare can take pride in the fact that the Canberra Times - part founded by her late husband, Arthur Shakespear - has played an integral role in the development and maturing of Canberra itself.

The Canberra Times has stood the test of time. It has reported local, national and international news without fear, without favour.

I am sure the publisher, editors and staff are looking ahead to news gathering into the next century with the enthusiasm that was obviously present on the first day of publication.

I say that the enthusiasm was obviously present on that historic first friday in September 50 years ago because I noticed a page one report on the Prime Minister (Mr Stanley Bruce ) attending a function at the Port Adelaide Town Hall.

A Mr Gray, an official of the Waterside Workers' Union walked up to Mr Bruce and presented him with a writ for 5,000 pounds for alleged slander.

The Canberra Times report said that Mr Bruce was completely taken aback and had said the whole thing was so well managed that the Union should have had a photographer present to take a picture of the delivery of the writ.

It so happens that I too am going to Adelaide this Friday. I hope that the Canberra Times is equally well organised.