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PRIME MINISTER

SPEAKING NOTES FOR USE BY THE PRIME MINISTER
AT THE 1984 WALKLEY AWARDS
8 NOVEMBER 1984

I am very pleased to have been asked to join you tonight on the occasion of the 1984 W.G. Walkley National Awards for Australian Journalism.

I particularly welcome this opportunity to acknowledge the best work of our journalists in the past year. I am tempted indeed to suggest an award for outstanding achievements on the cricket field. But then some would say I might be one-eyed on that matter.

What I do see more clearly is that your profession counts among its ranks some of the best and most dedicated Australians at work today. I say this not because I believe I have received even-handed, fair and generous treatment at your hands - this has certainly not always been the case. Rather I do so because I strongly believe Australia is on the whole well served by its journalists. Australians should all fully appreciate the contribution made by many of our journalists to the maintenance of a vigorous, thriving Australian democracy. Without a constructively critical, probing media Australia would be a less productive, less dynamic and I believe less healthy society.

The role of the practising journalist has evolved incredibly over the course of the last 30 years. When Sir William Walkley instituted these awards in 1956 television had just been introduced to Australia and the print media were the dominant outlet.

Even only 12 years ago - we are reminded in Laurie Oakes' and David Solomon's book "The Making of an Australian Prime Minister" - Joe Chamberlain had to be persuaded to cancel a public meeting in favour of a Whitlam television appearance. Today the crucial role of the electronic media in campaigning is recognised by everyone.

Some regret this and particularly its associated emphasis on image, personality and the short grab. Others, I think quite rightly, appreciate that it is only through the electronic media that many in our community are regularly involved with the political process.

This is not to underestimate the vital role of the print media. Their careful analysis of issues is critical to an adequate, well-informed community understanding of government policies and programs. Their role in drawing attention to emerging community concerns and preoccupations is also indispensable to the Government's ability adequately to cater for the needs of society.

Through the media the people get access to their political leaders. Talk-back radio presents unparalleled opportunities for anyone and everyone to put a view. Talk-back is sometimes an arduous experience, certainly more than question-time in Parliament has been recently, but as a vehicle through which community leaders can better understand the nation's issues and concerns, it is invaluable. Obviously it is also a great help to any politician wanting to get his point across.

One thing that journalists and politicians share is pressure. We political leaders are legitimately subject to constant probing scrutiny by the media. You the journalists must also satisfy the people's requirement for quick, reliable and thorough presentation of the facts and for the stories that lie behind the facts. I am reminded of Lord Curzon's observation:

"I hesitate to say what the functions of the modern journalist may be; but I imagine that they do not exclude the intelligent anticipation of facts even before they occur."

Whatever the pressure, however, the demands of the moment, the attractions of the sensational scoop should not be allowed to obscure the heavy responsibilities of the media. Sometimes a sense of social responsibility - and very occasionally a wider sense of the national interest - will require that journalists forego a "good story". Ideally I would like to think such judgements would be made by the media themselves.

There is a very special relationship between Governments and the media. Governments need to have community understanding and involvement in their programs. In large measure we depend on the media for success in this endeavour. The media in turn need reasonable access to information if they are properly and accurately to present and interpret matters of interest to the country. It is recognition of this necessarily close, almost symbiotic relationship between government and media - between government and the country at large - that has motivated this Government's commitment to open government.

I believe the present Labor Government has set new standards of openness. It has done so in a highly responsible way - thus contributing greatly to the unprecedented confidence that now marks relations between the Government and the country at large.

Our media need to be of the highest standard. Appropriately the Walkleys give recognition to the outstanding achievements within the media in any one year. All the winners of this year's Walkleys have shown the special skill which is the hallmark of the outstanding journalist.

To all the winners of these awards and to those whose work has been highly commended, my heartiest congratulations.