



# PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
AAP EDITORIAL CONFERENCE  
GOLD COAST - 11 JUNE 1987

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This is the second time that AAP has hosted a conference for editors and news directors of the nation's media.

It is in fact only the second time that such a conference has been held in Australia. I remember with pleasure addressing your first conference in May 1985 - AAP's 50th anniversary.

I must begin therefore by congratulating AAP - and its chief executive Lee Casey - for again displaying the initiative to provide such a valuable forum for the men and women who produce the nation's news.

As Harry Gordon observes in the notes which accompany the conference agenda, it's not a bad idea for AAP, which acts as a vehicle to the media, to provide this means of communication between them.

So I trust the conference will become a regular major event in the media calendar.

If anything, the role of the editor and news producer is becoming even more important.

For you are the people who are responsible for ensuring the maintenance of our standards of freedom, accuracy and fairness in the media.

Australia has no inbuilt constitutional guarantee of the Freedom of the Press comparable to the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

Instead, it is part of the reality of Australian public life that the Australian media must operate within a web of common law protections of, for example, privacy and national security.

But it is not parliament, and it is not the courts, and it is not the proprietors, but you editors and news producers, who must ensure on a day to day basis how that web of regulation is to apply.

I would be less than honest if I said that as a politician I agreed with every one of your editorial decisions on the reporting of politics in this country.

That great Australian, my predecessor Ben Chifley, expressed a little of the irritation Prime Ministers feel for the press when he observed:

"I do not pretend to gaze into the crystal ball and foresee all that will happen in the future. That divine right or gift is given only to the editors of newspapers."

But that does not mean I lack respect for the complexity of your task. The contrary is true.

Even more importantly, I have frequently reaffirmed as Prime Minister my belief as to the fundamental importance of the free press in the definition of Australia as a free country.

Some of Australia's neighbours disagree, and sometimes, regrettably, they express that disagreement by restricting the ability of your staff members to do their job.

Only recently, during the tragic events in Fiji, we saw a military government crack down on a free press - the first time we have witnessed in the South Pacific the knee-jerk repression of the media which is the familiar hallmark of authoritarian regimes around the world.

Despite that crack down, I was proud and gratified that Australian journalists kept at their job and provided a detailed coverage of the coup and its follow-up.

I believe this is an appropriate audience for me to express my personal gratitude and respect to those Australian journalists responsible for what was, overall, a professional and informed coverage of a very difficult story.

The next few weeks will provide all of you with another difficult story.

Federal election campaigns provide unparalleled examples of what I described before as your responsibility to protect the standards of a free, accurate and fair media.

At no time is the need for such a media greater than at federal elections.

At a time when the rest of the community takes sides, and expresses its divisions through the medium of the ballot box, it is vital that you remain independent and impartial.

I certainly am not going to provide any advice to you about how you should go about your task in the lead-up to 11 July - if, for no other reason, that you would tell me what, rather uncomfortably, to do with such advice.

But I do believe there is room generally for more coverage, and more detailed coverage, of the complex economic issues our nation faces.

Better technology and increasingly high standards of journalism mean that public discussion of the economy has, happily, been liberated from its traditional preserve on the editorial pages of upmarket broadsheet newspapers.

Even so, however, I believe some of you have missed out on a great story - or at least not given it the attention it deserves.

It is a story about nothing less than the nature and future of the Australian nation.

It is a story about a massive transformation taking place in our factories, our boardrooms, our financial institutions - a great awareness starting to permeate the Australian society - a historic watershed in our national development.

I refer to the dramatic and exciting restructuring of the Australian economy which is underway.

At the turn of the 21st century, Australians will regard the mid-1980s as among the most crucial in our history - akin to the years of post-war reconstruction or to the growth of the gold mining and pastoral industries in our colonial days.

They may be puzzled at the relative lack of attention given this story by parts of the media of the day.

Because they will appreciate that vital decisions - and essential sacrifices - were made.

They will appreciate that the nation turned away from the traditional way of doing things and started out on a new approach.

I am proud that after decades of neglect by conservative governments, it has been my government which has started out on this new path - on the task of restructuring the Australian economy.

We have realised, and, more importantly, acted on the realisation, that Australia as a nation of 16 million people cannot hope to maintain our comfortable standards of living by hoping the world will continue to pay us good prices for what we shear off the sheep's back or dig out of the ground.

To maintain and increase those standards, we must diversify and restructure our economy, building more internationally competitive manufacturing and service industries.

To foster the growth of those industries - or more precisely, to foster the jobs and income those industries will provide for Australia - has been the rationale behind the profound changes my Government has made to the economic institutions in this country.

We floated the dollar - with the result that Australian exporters are more competitive.

We deregulated the financial markets - with the result that capital can flow into Australia more easily to help build our economy.

We sought the cooperation of the trade union movement to secure wage restraint - with the result that our export industries can compete effectively on world markets.

We are well on the way to reducing the protection which had allowed our small manufacturing base to eschew the challenge of exporting and service instead the small domestic market.

We are giving increasing emphasise to education and training and to ensuring that our workers have relevant and adaptable skills.

The Australian media industry, too, has undergone profound change, which will result in a more competitive structure which is more capable of exploiting the opportunities offered by new technology.

This has been in part due to the Government's new media legislation which was approved by Parliament in the final week of the autumn session.

The five million regional viewers - who currently receive only one commercial service and who will now receive two extra services - will rapidly appreciate the benefits of the new structure.

It is our intention that this legislation will bring to regional viewers the kind of broadcast services hitherto solely available to viewers in the capital cities, not least by giving country viewers access to a third television station.

The 30-year-old two station rule on ownership and control of commercial television was replaced with a 60% population reach rule.

Together with the provision of increased regional services this new rule will foster the development of more balanced and stronger commercial TV services.

The new structure will also ensure that your viewers and readers have diversity in their sources of information, by ending cross-media ownership.

The new legislation will also bring - to city and country viewers alike - significant networking capacity with all the advantages that will bring in cost saving and in the encouragement of greater Australian content.

I am confident too that the changes will ensure the retention of the strong competitive streak which has characterised the Australian media since its early days.

Competition will flourish for the first time in regional television where none now exists; and competition will continue to flourish in the newspaper industry where, alongside the giants of News Ltd and the Fairfax group, a number of second tier newspaper groups has sprung up.

At the same time the cross-media agglomerations, which have typified the Australian media industry since the newspaper proprietors saw the potential of radio in the 1920s, will be significantly broken down.

Let me also briefly list some of the other innovations introduced by my Government in the interests of increasing the competition and quality of the Australian media.

.. the SBS network has grown substantially. Since March 1983 SBS services have been extended to Canberra, Cooma, Goulburn, Newcastle, Adelaide, Brisbane, Wollongong, Perth, Hobart - and the Gold Coast.

.. ABC's second regional radio network, to be opened in Perth by my colleague the Communications Minister, Michael Duffy, on 24 June provides a second ABC service for those parts of the country which currently receive only one ABC station.

Some 80 transmitters are to be installed in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory this year, with about 300 sites to be included in the network over the next decade.

.. ABC TV and radio services are also being extended to remote areas. The Remote or Underserved Communities Scheme will bring ABC services to 42 small communities in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia which have never had them before. The Homestead and Community Broadcasting Satellite Scheme is enabling even smaller communities to receive ABC radio and TV for the first time - via satellite.

.. Australia's regional residents will also benefit from the expansion of the commercial FM radio licences currently being planned. It is our intention where possible that these services will be provided by new operators. Twenty-seven markets will receive new markets by 1989 - with the Gold Coast among the first batch.

.. A third commercial television licence for Perth is expected to commence service on Australia Day 1988.

.. Community and special interest groups have not been left out. Twenty-six new public stations have been licensed since March 1983. Radio services for the print handicapped are in the process of moving onto the broadcast bands where they can be received by everyone.

.. In telecommunications, AUSSAT's first satellites have been launched and are operating; Telecom's national fibre optic link has been started; and Telecom has also introduced new services including Viatel and teletex.

.. Another recent innovation is the concept of Video and Audio Entertainment and Information Services (VAEIS) - such as Sportsplay and Skychannel. These services provide sport and entertainment packages to Clubs, Hotels and other non-domestic users.

The achievements I believe are, by any standard, impressive.

They will ensure that your viewers and readers receive more of the high quality services they deserve and expect.

The media is not, as I have already said, an area in which any Government intervention is desirable in terms of what you report day by day or how you report it.

But we do have a role in attempting to create the framework - particularly in the electronic media - in which as many people as possible can gain access to a diverse range of your services.

I believe we have done that.

We have welcomed, and will continue to welcome, new players in the media industry.

Ultimately however your responsibility - as the principal disseminators of information in our society - is the key one.

I wish you well in that task.

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