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PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
PRESENTATION OF 1990 WALKLEY AWARDS
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At face value, it's not exactly the best time to be a journalist.

"Financial difficulties" is hardly an adequate phrase for an industry where two out of three TV networks are in receivership; where the Fairfax chain is in receivership; where News Corporation has its own share of debt problems; where commercial radio and some regional media are also struggling.

Unfortunately, many employees, including journalists, have paid the price, with their jobs, for their employers' mistakes.

And those still in the industry are having to do more with less, as financial resources available for news gathering and presenting dry up.

But despite the gloom, today's presentation of the 1990 Walkley Awards is, legitimately and genuinely, a cause for celebration.

This is an occasion to honour individual award winners - journalists who have risen to the heights of excellence over the past twelve months.

And it is also an occasion for celebrating the professionalism and excellence of journalism itself.

I am not trying to put any false gloss on what have been traumatic events for the news industry over the past couple of years. Jobs have been lost, outlets have been closed, programs have been axed, and editorial budgets have been trimmed.

But the faults and failings of management haven't stopped the news industry from carrying out its essential task.

As ever, that task is to keep the public informed, so that it can exercise its sovereign role in our democratic society.

And as ever, whether that task is performed depends for the most part not on the quality of the managers but on the quality of the journalists - on their professionalism, their dedication, their integrity and their thirst for news.

So it is essential to our democracy this quality survives and flourishes. Today we are celebrating the fact that it does.

It's interesting to ask ourselves why this is so. What are the conditions under which journalism will continue to flourish as a vital and independent source of information and opinion in Australia?

I know that many journalists, and others, are deeply concerned that the nature and the concentration of media ownership in Australia poses a threat to journalism. The recent rally at the Sydney Opera House shows the depth of passion, if not the factual insight, that exists on this issue.

I am not going to deny that it is preferable for the Australian media to be owned by a diverse range of Australian proprietors.

Indeed, the effect of the ownership rules that my Government has introduced has been of course to enhance the diversity of media owners in any one market.

As far as the average person is concerned, diversity of media sources is guaranteed. We have placed an insuperable structural impediment in the way of anyone who might seek to impose a monolithic editorial view on a community.

And as I made clear in my press conference yesterday, my preference is for continued Australian ownership of the Fairfax group.

But let me state my belief here, as someone who is about as avid a consumer of the media as anyone, that such issues of ownership, while significant, do not constitute the sole, or necessarily even the most important, determinant of the media's capacity to exercise its crucial democratic role.

Diverse ownership has not necessarily created diverse output; and uniform ownership has not necessarily created uniform output.

The truth of the first statement is apparent in the programming history of the three commercial TV networks.

Australia's networks, each owned by separate companies, have nevertheless adhered, for decades, to almost identical programming strategies. They have provided the broadcasting equivalent of the Two Airlines Agreement, offering the same formulas of news, sport and entertainment, at the same hours of the day, for the same broad markets. I hope the current shake-out in television will, within the framework of adequate and comprehensive services, lead to some bolder departures from those well-tried formulas.

The proof of the second statement I made - that uniform ownership does not necessarily create uniform output - is obvious in the very different coverage of Canberra provided by the Telegraph Mirror in Sydney and the Herald-Sun in Melbourne. The fact that these newspapers are News Corporation stable-mates does not prevent each paper from taking quite different stances on a number of issues.

Indeed, regardless of media ownership, Australians today are being exposed to a greater diversity of opinion within the media than ever before. There are more columnists, and reporters themselves are exercising greater interpretative and analytic powers - especially as newspapers take up the role of backgrounding the news that is reported in more truncated form by TV.

So while I repeat that of course I do not dismiss the significance of ownership, the quality and diversity of editorial output is determined by many other factors.

In the final analysis, it is determined by the quality of the editorial staff.

It is determined by the people at the coal-face of news gathering and news presenting: reporters, news editors, producers and editors.

Ultimately, the responsibility for maintaining the media's performance in a democratic society rests on those people.

And judged by that criterion, the Australian media, that is to say, the profession of Australian journalism, is doing a great job - though I must say that even after all my years in public life I've never lost the capacity to be amazed at the performance of some of the Canberra Press Gallery. But that is another story.

It is for all these reasons that I particularly welcome the concept of a Charter of Independence.

I know the Charter idea originated in response to a particular ownership question at a particular newspaper - the 1988 Robert Maxwell attempt to take over The Age. But its significance now extends beyond that circumstance to embrace a fundamentally important facet of the media today.

Because if what I have said so far is true - that it is output rather than ownership that ultimately determines the quality of the finished product - then any movement that defends the significance and sweep of control by the editor rather than the proprietor must be welcome.

My friends,

I don't want to spend a lot of time today singling out individual award winners. But it would be remiss of me not to express particular congratulations to the journalists who have won awards for overseas reporting:

- Peter Cave for his radio news reports on the fall of the Berlin Wall;
- Greg Wilsemith for his radio current affairs reports on the Iran earthquake. Since that tragic earthquake, Wilesmith's superb work has continued in his coverage of the Gulf crisis;
- and Four Corners cameraman Wayne Harley for his extraordinary camera work on the Ethiopian famine.

We have seen over the past year or so the very world change before our eyes.

What used to be accepted axioms of international affairs have been jettisoned with the relaxation of tensions between the superpowers, the overthrow of the repressive regimes of eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the reemergence of an effective United Nations Organisation.

Today we confront a new set of profoundly testing problems: the Gulf crisis, the possibility of trade war, the daunting legacy of economic, social and environmental problems bequeathed to the new democratic rulers of Eastern Europe.

If ever there was a time in the past four decades when Australians needed expert and informed coverage of global affairs, surely it is now. And it is very important that such coverage be provided by Australian reporters.

It's clear today that we are being well served in this regard - and it is probably no coincidence that the three Award winners I have named are all employed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation whose reputation for informed international reporting is secure.

Let me close as I began.

In what are generally gloomy times for your industry, these awards demonstrate the continuing commitment of Australian journalists to the standards of excellence - and the continuing capacity of the best of them to attain those standards.

It is important that once a year the profession of journalism gathers in this way to pay tribute to those of its members of surpassing quality.

It is all to the good that journalists - and the sponsor of the Walkley Awards - reward excellence with public acclaim, and display excellence so that it can be emulated by others.

In this way, you are ensuring in a direct way that your vital standards of professionalism are safeguarded and promoted.

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