

# QUILLS 2002

## Speech made by PAUL KEATING

Thank you very much indeed, I just can't stay away from you. No, No, there's just something about you ...

But Greg (Hywood) is right, I've had quite a few run-ins with journalists. I've never ever plotted... I've never gotten into proprietors, I have it out with them, and there's a lot of difference with what I did with them. It's not the way it's been lately, you know.

I was going to, when Greg asked me to do this six months or so ago, I was going to talk about the role of the political reporter in the new age, the new age of news covering, the re-interpretation of the interpretable, the pooling of news gathering, syndication, the tyranny of the hourly reporting, declining relevance of the commentator - these kind of things.

But given the events of the last few weeks – and months – in a country where the government doesn't like intellectuals, Aborigines (not saying sorry to the Aboriginal industry), homosexuals – of which we are conservatively tolerant, says Mr Howard – refugees, unions, the public sector and more often than not the courts. You would think journalism would be going through a renaissance. But overall, as the government is now going to have a good solid whack to put in the whole of media diversity and pluralism.. and this week introduced its new media legislation and tonight I thought the opposite, that perhaps I could address that question and of pluralism because it does matter to every one of you.

The cornerstone of this legislation – of any media legislation – should be to encourage diversity and guarantee pluralism. And let me just briefly say, people say 'well why did we make those changes in the 80's?'

Very simply this: that in all the country towns of Australia who have one television station, if you look at Ballarat, Morwell, wherever it was, you had the one station. And there had to come a time when people had some choice and the natural thing was to ally them with the networks. So if there were to be three stations in Ballarat, it then broke the Menzies rule of the 'two station rule'. At the same time the Herald & Weekly Times was tipping away down here, ready to collapse and all of the assets would have been spewed out on the pavement and the existing owners were to pick them up. These two things were happening together. So if we were to get rid of the 'two station rule' what would we have? A four station rule, a five station rule? So what we thought is, why don't we have a really mature set-up here? If they want to be in television, then let them go across the country and be in television. But just say to them, if they own newspapers and television, that that would be grand-fathered in, that they can't acquire newspapers in the same cities where they have television or vice-versa. And this was to see when that massive conglomeration of newspapers: the Courier Mail, The West Australian, The Adelaide Advertiser, and the Melbourne Herald-Sun, the Hobart Mercury – all that came collapsing down and brought them in the hands of Fairfax or News or Packer. And hence these rules were established.

Now, the government has had a reference to the Productivity Commission on the subject, and the Commission very forthrightly said that the cross media rule should not go until there is a dramatic widening of opportunity in the various mediums. In other words, there isn't a prohibition on an additional number of free-to-air television stations. There isn't a prohibition on what people can do in datacasting. There isn't a reservation of spectrum to the television stations as is the case now. In other words, in more open, completely open and de-regulated system, the importance of the rule is less significant than now. But in a closed system the rule, the cross rules, are very important.

The centre piece of the government's legislation is the set of exceptions from the cross media rules, with the exemptions authorised by the Australian Broadcasting Authority. So if you were accepted to be an

exempt organisation, and if you are exempted you can buy what you like. That appallingly weak outfit, the ABA, run by David Flint, a public supporter of conservative cause, a political activist, is going to guarantee separate editorial policy between outlets in a common ownership. Now everyone here knows what nonsense this is. A government agency being able to guarantee, but not just guarantee - certify, that editorial control of one newspaper would be distinct from another within the same ownership. And that if capital cities newspapers were only in common with the television company, all the elements would be editorially separate, on the ABA's certification.

Now have you ever heard, as a basis of an act of parliament, such pathetic nonsense?

How long do you think it would take for PBL to get an exemption from David Flint's ABA? If you want an idea of how a media unit separation works with the Packers, have a look at 'ninemsn' - one of the most visited sites in Australia. You can see the cross linkages to the Bulletin, Crown, Ralph and the banner ads for the Channel Nine programs and try to convince yourselves other than the fact that the Packer PBL media units are locked up tight. Or try to convince yourselves that anything remotely original or fresh is going on there. Or... or that this is an alternative to the existing media. The only thing guaranteeing any kind of media diversity and pluralism in journalism at the moment is a cross-media rule. And if it went, there would be only two hits in it. That the claim back would hit the government book shop shelves and the ... would hit the Fairfax shareroom. It would be over in a flash. In this city the Packers interest would control the city's Casino, the city's major metropolitan newspaper, the city's predominant television network and exercise a major influence over the city's pay television provider.

To get to the point, in such a media structure, with all the social ramifications, that if you want a free passage in Melbourne, you'll need to get your passport stamped at PBL in Park Street in the city.

Don't think I am exaggerating. Don't think I am exaggerating. Nobody for a second should be fooled by this shonky government's shonky policy. What's going on here is a terminal threat to any real media diversity. Now there are issues with newspaper companies and the Fairfax organisation has given expression tonight, and there are serious long term issues such as the declining nature of the revenue base of newspapers. But the answer is not to abrogate the only rule which would see its commerciality improve at the express cost of its journalism. If The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Financial Review require growth in new media it can happen, it can happen now. But having an interest or being permitted to own or purchase, a share or control of a declining free to air television station, is not new media and this is the only structural thing the cross-media rule stops. It stopped Fairfax and Sons buying Channel Seven or Channel Ten, or Channel Nine. But newspaper are historic media ...

But the paradox is that the media is also absolutely necessary to feel our way through the fog, to understand what it all means, to listen through the screen of noise and find the value. There are many good things about Australian journalism. Our tabloid newspapers tend to be streets ahead of their British and American counterparts. There are committed individual people working on newspapers both here and on assignment overseas. We see their often brave reporting every night on television and we see it in print. So while the ABC remains a central source of news and information and an essential part of Australian culture; we could not do without it - truly we could not do without it. Some, though not all, of our commercial radio, shows a high degree of professionalism. However the shortcomings are also manifest and growing trivialisation, a danger to working on news and comment. As the years go on and one watches the debate, you just don't see the turnover we would like to see in people. The fact that we are now talking about the merging of the bureaus and the rest, which comes, I know, from cost cutting exercises. But, in looking at our future and the future of our politics, we are not going to be able to solve these problems in a country that is small, where things are locked up. And where you've got one particular family-interested television and media, with 10 million of assets. It's simply too large an accumulation of wealth across a country this size and the influence of it is pervasive. This is why until we see some real understanding and maturity, or the adoption of the proposals that the Productivity Commission recommended; until we see a genuine opening up, that there are competitors in free to air television, that

people can compete in any area of the media, then the cause and reasons for these restrictions are not there. But if they were to go, this government, you know, it's a bit like, they'll keep coming at you. I mentioned a list - Aboriginals, the unions, homosexuals – they'll keep coming at you. It's a bit like Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, they are still giving lip, still at it. This government will keep coming at you.

People seem to think that Howard will – you know – sort of 'drop-off'. Don't get him wrong. This guy is a reactionary. He's not a conservative. He'll keep coming at you with these things. As if they didn't know about the children overboard, as if they didn't know about Bill Heffernan's attack, as if they didn't know these things. If any of us had done their job, they'd know what the information feed is like in these respects. But, they'll just sort of wear it, they'll cop it, they don't care any more. They'll just press on.

So I thought given the opportunity, that there are so many youthful and smiling faces about, I should just have a quick run over the target. There are a few things worth saying ...you might recall at the end of the 1996 election on election night I said when the government changes, the country changes. The country has changed, not for the better. This is not a richer country than it was and the international commentary is there for people to make a judgment about that. But the fact is, you people in journalism, I've spent my life in public life... I believe in journalists, I believe in the media, I believe unless there is a certain righteousness, and I don't mean a 'big R' Righteousness, I mean a certain important righteousness about people in public life and those who report to them, the country can't advance. And grubby politics and grubby views never build anything.

So this is a time to be on red alert, now there are all sorts of things people say, "oh, this debate's been on and off for a long time, let's get it over and done with", let's say to these people, "do you want to give the game up"? Let somebody in. Let someone have Channel 11 or Channel 12 or Channel 13. Pay television, let everyone be in it. All these other areas of media - let everyone be in them. Let the foreigners come in and buy the print if necessary. Let's not just have, as now, free to air stations with a moratorium in a pile of spectrum, billions of spectrum locked up. Let's have this kind of inroad and then I think we can have a sane debate about cross-media. But in the meantime, we're off the record and notwithstanding...you know what Fairfax needs? What is always needed? An entrepreneur. The thing is, there are no entrepreneurs in graduate schools for management. Because if they were, they wouldn't be there!

At any rate, he's a good fellow and we wish you well. Don't be misled by either - Fairfax are on the wrong tram lines. As long as you, as journalists, understand how important these broadsheets are to us. Look, one of the remarks Kerry said, I said years ago, he had a PhD in Greek. It wasn't just him, that they all do, all these guys. They're all snatch and grab merchants and if we leave them to decide our future, we're nuts.

Thank you.