

The Media and Parliament: Image-Making and Image-Breaking*

Anne Summers

THE SUBJECT of today's lecture is one of perhaps deceptive significance. Both the media and the Parliament are such well-known and familiar institutions within Australian life and politics that it is easy to take them for granted. Or, at least, to be complacent about their existence and their functions.

Today's lecture provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at these two institutions and their relationship with each other and to offer some thoughts on the evolution of that relationship and its possible future directions. I speak to you as someone who has had a varied relationship with both institutions. I was a member of the parliamentary Press Gallery from 1979 to 1983 while I was employed first as political correspondent and later as Canberra Bureau Chief for the *Australian Financial Review*. I served as a member of the Press Gallery Committee for some of that time and was a member of the Committee that worked with the Presiding Officers of the Parliament on arrangements for the media in what we then referred to as the 'New and Permanent' Parliament House.

In 1983 I was elected President of the Press Gallery, a position which required me to interact closely with the Presiding Officers and other officials of the Parliament and which allowed me to gain better insights into the operations of both the Parliament and the press. I had not, for instance, fully appreciated before holding this position just how much the media were expected to regulate themselves as far as their occupancy of space in Parliament House was concerned.

* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 1 August 1997.

Unfortunately, I occupied this position for only a few months before resigning from the media to join the bureaucracy as head of the Office of the Status of Women. From inside the Prime Minister's Department I had a very different perspective on the Parliament.

Whereas as a journalist my job was to report on the activities of members of Parliament, especially those who were Ministers [in the Fraser Government], and to look for signs of conflict or scandal, as a bureaucrat I had very different responsibilities. Now it was part of my job to try to anticipate questions that might be asked of the Prime Minister [Bob Hawke] by Opposition members and to provide answers to those questions for him. Each parliamentary sitting day we would update our list of PPQs [Possible Parliamentary Questions] which would then be consolidated into the Prime Minister's Question Time Brief. It was also our responsibility to provide answers to questions placed on the parliamentary Notice Paper by members, and to attend parliamentary Estimates Committee hearings to defend departmental budgets and programs.

Six years later, in 1992, I returned to Parliament House—which was no longer being referred to as either 'new' or 'permanent'—to work as a consultant in the Office of the Prime Minister, Paul Keating. This was very much a political job and so my responsibilities, and hence my perspective on both the media and the Parliament, were again very different.

It is fair to say that I spent a good deal of time either trying to avoid the media or else trying to persuade individual journalists to the point of view the Prime Minister's office wanted advanced. As far as the Parliament was concerned, I was once again involved in drafting PPQs and also 'Dorothy Dixers'—those questions which were planted with government backbenchers to enable the Prime Minister to make a point or reveal information that was otherwise not being aired.

But being in a Prime Minister's office, which is of course located inside Parliament House, it is easy to forget that just because the Prime Minister runs the country, and the government, does not mean he runs Parliament House! While there is usually a high degree of cooperation between the parliamentary departments and the Government, especially the Prime Minister, there can be occasions when the relationship is less than cordial.

I well recall the day of the 'True Believers Victory Dinner' to mark the re-election of the Keating Government which was held in the Great Hall of Parliament House in March 1993 and which I organised. As part of the celebrations I had brought in Yothu Yindi, the Aboriginal band, who of course needed a sound stage with full amplification. They brought their roadies with them to build and set up the stage.

At around 5.00p.m. on the evening of the dinner, and while we in the Prime Minister's office were engaged in an almighty brawl about the composition of the new ministry, I was informed by someone from the Joint House Department, the body that actually runs Parliament House, that their tradesmen—being fully unionised—objected to the Yothu Yindi people working inside the building. They also laid claim to wanting to operate all lighting and sound equipment that evening, and to performing various other functions that we had been required by the band and the party planner to hire their own people to perform.

This was not a nice dilemma for a *Labor* Government staffer to have to resolve, at such short notice, in the middle of a major political stoush, and with a tangible absence of good will evident as tempers flared and the arguments got heated.

It all got resolved in the end, of course, although I think we ended up having to pick up a sizeable overtime bill for people who did not actually perform any duties that night—and which threw the dinner into the red financially. I recount this incident only because it serves to illustrate that the operation of the Parliament is a far more complex operation than most people would glean from seeing the grab of Question Time on the nightly news, or even from undertaking a tour of Parliament House.

The most common public perception of the Parliament would surely be that it comprises the two chambers and little, if anything, else. (This perception is in fact reinforced by the public tours of Parliament House, concentrating as they do on the chambers, the Members' Hall and the public spaces). Most outsiders would be unaware of the other operations of the Parliament, such as the Library, Hansard and Sound and Vision, and are unlikely to have given any thought to the army of staff ranging from caterers and gardeners to electricians and cleaners who, in addition to the professional staff in the departments, keep the institution and its services running.

I suspect there is a similar degree of ignorance about the workings of the media. Although most people are probably aware that the media are physically located within Parliament House, I doubt if there is widespread comprehension of why this is so and of the kinds of compromises and constraints it entails. Nor would most people be aware of the fact that there is a dynamic and not always friendly relationship between the media and the Parliament.

Which brings me to the heart of the topic assigned for today's lecture: what is the nature of the relationship between the media and the Parliament? And how are our images of both institutions affected by that relationship?

The Australian Parliament has until very recently always provided the media with free office accommodation within Parliament House itself. This arrangement is, as far as I am aware, unique in the English-speaking democratic world. The American media has correspondents located within the White House, to cover the executive of government, and within the Congress, to cover the legislature, but their head offices in Washington DC are located outside these public buildings. Similarly, the British Parliament houses the lobby correspondents of the English media but not their entire political staffs.

In Australia the tradition has been that *all* the Canberra staff of all the media organisations, large and small, are accommodated in Parliament House. This has meant that newspapers, radio and television stations, wire services, newsletters and even freelance journalists with no affiliation have been provided at no cost with office accommodation and such services as light and power. Over the decades, this has amounted to a subsidy worth surely many hundreds of thousands of dollars—if not more—from the taxpayer to media organisations.

It has been a very cosy arrangement for all concerned.

It suited the media, needless to say. For the media owners, it meant they could maintain a Canberra operation without having to pay rent. For journalists it meant being able to operate

within the cosy confines of Parliament House where propinquity ensured constant social as well as professional contact with MPs and Ministers. For parliamentarians it meant having the media on tap, so to speak; an MP who wanted to get a point across had simply to stroll up to the Press Gallery, a few flights of stairs away, and in a very short time could drop in and speak to every major media outlet in the country. How efficient! How self-serving!

In fact, the mutually reinforcing nature of this arrangement for both politicians and the press was clearly demonstrated in the early 1980s when an increase in the number of senators and members presented an accommodation crisis in the old Parliament House. The Presiding Officers briefly entertained the notion of either evicting the media, or moving them to new temporary offices outside the main Parliament House building in order to house the new MPs. When the Government got wind of this proposal, the Prime Minister—Bob Hawke—made very clear (in typical salty language, I understand) that he believed such an action would so alienate the media it could cost the government the next election. So, the new members of Parliament were put into the temporary offices—and the Press Gallery stayed put.

This, it seems to me, was a potent example of parliamentarians' perception of the power of the media to shape and even determine not just its image—but its very future.

During my time as Bureau Chief for the *Financial Review* I argued strongly that we should move out of Parliament House. Needless to say, my proposal was extremely unpopular with all concerned. The senior Fairfax executives in Sydney could not see why they should move from a rent-free situation to a rent-paying one. And my journalistic colleagues could not see why they should give up the cosiness of their current situation.

In fact, the extreme cosiness of the arrangements in the old Parliament House was the only argument that had any currency at all with my colleagues. Most Gallery offices were unbelievably cramped; in our case, we had seven people working in a space that was about 2 metres by 6 metres so some journalists were prepared to at least entertain the notion of moving to somewhere more spacious. But at the end of the day, no one wanted to break away from the pack. The Press Gallery operates like a tribe, or even a herd, and then as now, there is safety and comfort in being part of it.

What were my arguments then for wanting to move? I only repeat them because I believe they are perhaps even more relevant today, and are certainly pertinent when it comes to the images of Parliament, and parliamentarians, that are projected by the media. I took the view that the disadvantages of our being in Parliament House outweighed the advantages.

The benefits were obvious. In addition to those I have already outlined, there was the efficiency with which government and non-government information was able to be distributed via the Press Gallery boxes. There was also the ability to view in person Question Time and major debates or motions due to the proximity of the chambers to the Press Gallery, the ability to—often, literally—run into ministers and other MPs in the corridors and exchange gossip and information.

Against this, being located in Parliament House encouraged us to equate Parliament with Government. It was easy to believe that the business of government was totally confined to that building. (This myopia was not the exclusive province of journalists; even though most ministers were provided with offices in their departments, it was rare for them to ever visit let

alone spend prolonged periods in them.) The focus of concentration on Parliament House meant that whole areas of government and political activity, e.g. the bureaucracy, the High Court, the military, were easily overlooked. This no doubt suited the Government as it made news, and journalists, easier to manage but it reduced the scope of political coverage.

In those days some journalists still interviewed bureaucrats in their offices rather than on the phone but it was becoming rare. Yet in my experience it was always worthwhile; I believe that unless you already know the person pretty well you always get more out of a face to face conversation than you do from a phone interview.

The other problem with the Press Gallery arrangement, then and now, is that it reduces or even eliminates competition amongst the media and this results in an extraordinary uniformity of the coverage coming out of Canberra. The physical location of the media organisations cheek by jowl with each other in the Gallery in conjunction with the fact they are all covering the same stories day in and day out produces common thinking and a like-mindedness which is at odds with the usual journalistic competitiveness.

A degree of this is inevitable inasmuch as the story *is* the same most of the time. What happens in Parliament each sitting day is likely to be a major news story and although individual commentators might have different ‘takes’ on the events, the facts of the situation are going to be the same for everyone.

In addition, these days governments are adroit at managing news and they, too, do their best to orchestrate the next day’s headlines by controlling the outflow of information. Sometimes an individual journalist is favoured by a Minister or an authorised staffer with an exclusive or a leak, but most of the time the story is meted out via a press conference or other mechanism and all are doled out the same information.

The result is that the same story is filed by each media organisation in the Press Gallery and their head offices are likely to complain if they do not receive that story. Thus uniformity is encouraged. Not just by the physical location of the Press Gallery journalists but also by the attitude of their news editors or others they report to in Sydney or Melbourne.

Nor is initiative encouraged, it seems. I get the impression that few outside Parliament House, bureaucrats for instance, are used as sources these days although, to be fair, governments over the past decade or so have put the clamps on the public service to such an extent that it would be a brave bureaucrat who would give even an off the record interview these days.

Nevertheless, the sameness of the Canberra coverage is—particularly if you are a consumer of more than one daily newspaper, for instance—somewhat depressing. It lacks the excitement that rivalry and competition can generate. In other areas of the media, journalists thrive on scoops, on beating the opposition, on having exclusives. Why should Canberra, and political coverage, be any different?

There have been two major changes since I worked in the Press Gallery and, I would argue, both of them have weakened the media’s position and made them more beholden to the Parliament than they used to be.

In August 1988 the new Parliament House was opened and, like the old building, the Press Gallery was an integral part of its design and operation. Special galleries overlooking the chambers allowing Press Gallery reporters to observe proceedings at close quarters had been incorporated and, unlike the old building, they included areas nearby where reporters could file urgent or breaking stories without having to return to their main offices which, in turn by the standards of the old House, were barn-like in size.

The other important change has been the televising of Parliament which has given the public an opportunity to see for themselves what politicians are like and how they perform—and this makes them somewhat less reliant on journalists' descriptions and interpretations of Parliament.

Although the media has far more space in the current Parliament House than it enjoyed in the old, I would argue that the media are worse off now than it used to be. The media have far less physical access to members as whole areas of the building are now off limits in a way that was unenforceable in the design of the old House. The media are now totally prevented from entering the Senate or House of Representatives lobbies, or from wandering around the corridors in the executive wing, making chance meetings with ministers virtually impossible. Even if a journalist does run into a minister, strict observance of the rules should prevent a conversation from ensuing unless it is instigated by the minister.

In the old House, journalists became practised in the art of lurking outside the chambers or the party rooms or ministers' offices on the off chance that one could waylay a source and extract some valuable information. Today such exchanges are more likely to occur on the telephone and this requires the journalist to have to run the gauntlet of vigilant staffers before they can be put through to their quarry—and then there's always the chance staffers are listening in, which is a great inhibitor to the minister dropping any decent information.

The Presiding Officers in consultation with the Press Gallery Committee, have always stipulated rules that determined media access and activities within the building. These rules, for instance, lay down where microphones and cameras can be used and thus where interviews can take place. The notorious and undignified 'doorstop' interviews occur mainly because the various entrance doors to Parliament House are the only sanctioned places where ministers and members can be bailed up and asked questions. Apart from that, permission must be obtained for filming or tape-recording to take place inside the House unless at press conferences or inside the media's own studios.

I understand there has recently been some dispute between the Gallery and the Parliament on protocols for the taking of photographs of members in the chambers. An effort had been made to prevent photographers from snapping anyone except the member or senator who has the call, and is therefore on their feet, thus preventing them from having the opportunity to obtain candid pictures of parliamentarians in unguarded moments.

Ironically enough, many of the rationales for having the media in Parliament House have either lessened in importance or disappeared altogether in the new building. The fax machine has made the Press Gallery boxes less significant than they once were. (In fact, I understand ministers' offices more often than not fax releases to media offices rather than stroll up the stairs to 'box' them.) Television monitors in media offices allow journalists to watch

Question Time and other proceedings from their offices rather than walk down to the viewing galleries.

And, as I have already outlined, restrictions on journalists' movements make it less likely that they will have the privileged casual contacts with MPs that used to occur and that used to enable journalists to observe, and report on, so much of the drama of politics.

I remember, for instance, the two legendary leadership struggles in 1982 and 1983—between Andrew Peacock and Malcolm Fraser, and Bob Hawke and Bill Hayden. These occurred while Parliament still occupied the old building when journalists could come and go from the protagonists' offices—I well recall long lines of journalists waiting to see Hawke and Peacock who, for a time, had adjoining offices in the backblocks of the House of Representatives office quarters—and were an integral part of the drama.

But journalists were also allowed to mingle only a few feet away from the party meetings where the challenges were mounted and could observe the comings and goings and the caucusing, as well as being right on the spot when the results were announced. How different from the situation in 1991 when Paul Keating trooped into a committee meeting room to announce to the media that he had won his challenge against Bob Hawke.

I believe it is possible to argue that the balance of power between the media and the Parliament has now changed, and is tilted more Parliament's way. Perhaps the greatest indication of this can be found in the fact that the Parliament now successfully levies a form of rent from media organisations. Since July 1, 1991 organisations in the Press Gallery have been required to pay a so-called 'service charge', a fee which is worked out on the basis of the total space occupied in the Gallery. Television organisations pay at a higher rate to reflect their greater consumption of power and air conditioning. These charges do not equate to market rents, and so media organisations are still getting a good deal, but it is interesting that despite paying these fees they are not accorded tenants' rights. The Presiding Officers of the Parliament have retained the power to determine their rights of occupancy—and to rescind these if necessary.

Such dire threats are unlikely to ever be put into effect. Although relations between the media and the Parliament are sometimes tense and, on occasions, even hostile, it is hard to see them ever reverting to the kind of stand-off that occurred in 1955 when two journalists, Browne and Fitzpatrick, were hauled before the bar of the House and censured and ordered to be imprisoned for writing an article about the then Member for Bankstown to which he took exception.

These days, when a member or senator takes exception to media behaviour—as Senator Colston did recently concerning being photographed in a manner which breached the rules—the matter is likely to be smoothed over in a more diplomatic fashion. It is in no one's interests to have a 1955-style confrontation. For despite all of the advances in information technology, the Parliament remains very dependent on the media to inform the people about its activities. For this reason, the media is given access to services such as Hansard and the research facilities of the parliamentary Library that used to be unavailable to ordinary mortals.

That, as we shall see, is changing and yet another shift in the balance of power between Parliament and the media may be underway—although it is very early days yet.

But the televising of Parliament represented the beginning of a process whereby the media's monopoly on parliamentary information has been to some extent weakened. Televising of parliamentary proceedings has given the public an independent means of assessing the performance of their MPs and ministers. Even the short grabs of Question Time shown in the nightly television news enable voters to see, and judge, the interactions between various members and to make up their own minds what they think of them. Previously, the public had to rely on the interpretations put on those interactions by journalists. It is an interesting fact that the public perception and the perhaps more seasoned view of the journalists were often not in sync.

For instance, Paul Keating took the view that television had damaged his public image. While Press Gallery journalists mostly loved his tough language and combative style, and described him admiringly, on television he too often came across as an over-aggressive, ranting fanatic. For women especially, it was a big turn-off. So the televising of parliamentary proceedings can be seen as something of an erosion of the media's previous monopoly on disseminating images of the Parliament at work to the wider world.

The key roles of the media are to provide information and to supplement this with comment, or assessment of the information. There are obviously many types of information, from printed sources to whispered corridor conversations, from leaked supposedly secret documents to physical descriptions of how a Prime Minister (or other Minister) looked as he handled a tough press conference. There are also various means of purveying information, from the very general reports on television and radio or in mass circulation newspapers to the necessarily more technical and detailed advice to be found in specialist newsletters. To the extent that any of this information can be obtained from non-media sources, the media's previously unassailable role as the main purveyor of images of Parliament may be under threat.

Take what is available on the Internet for instance.

As an exercise while preparing these remarks, I spent several hours roaming through the home page of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia (<http://www.aph.gov.au/>). This site contains a range and depth of information that was both unexpected and, without exaggeration, breath-taking. Let me give you a few examples by retracing the steps I took.

The first and most basic thing to do was to scan the index to the Australian Parliament's home page. This provides a summary of what the three main parliamentary departments (the House of Representatives, the Senate and the Parliamentary Library) have on offer. Available, should you want them in your very own home, are transcripts of all parliamentary committee hearings and their ultimate reports; copies of all bills and explanatory memoranda; the Notice Paper of each day of sitting; the standing orders of both chambers and each day's Hansard.

As well, there are lists of contact details of all current members and senators in addition to lists going back to the first Parliament of 1901 of all prime ministers, ministers, opposition leaders, women members and a break down of the state of the parties in each of these Parliaments. You can also get the Australian Constitution, Odgers' classic *Australian Senate Practice*; and everything you ever wanted to know but were afraid to ask about federal elections, by-elections, electorates and referenda. And, beginning next session of Parliament,

there will be individual web sites for each member and senator. At present only ministers have them, provided by their departments, or party leaders, provided by their parties and most of them are so far pretty uninteresting.

The Parliament's home page, on the other hand, contains an impressive body of research, far more than most of us would ever have occasion to consult but invaluable for students and, even, journalists wanting to check a date or other fact. To test the system and see just what it had to offer, I went via my computer into the parliamentary Library and asked for an index of their *Current Issues Briefs*. I recall that when I was a Press Gallery journalist these briefs, legendary for the quality of their research, were not available to us. Now they are there for any member of the public who has a computer, a modem and a printer. From the list of Briefs from the past two years I selected a paper on a subject I've been meaning to bone up on. Entitled *Copyright and Monopoly Profits: Books, Records and Software*, it had been prepared by a member of the Economics, Commerce and Industrial Relations Group, and when printed came to 16 pages of single-spaced text, altogether a comprehensive and impressive document. I then looked at what other kinds of parliamentary information was on offer and found that I can access any Australian state parliament—including the Hansards of most of them—as well as a number of parliaments in other countries.

I was short of time and so did not visit the US Congress or the European Parliament, but I will do so in the near future. (I am already an avid fan of the White House web site and have used it to obtain printed copies of the speeches President Clinton made while he was in Australia late last year.)

Finally, I browsed the list of other, non-parliamentary Internet resources which the parliamentary Library says it makes use of and dipped into ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) and some of its recent media releases before delving into the world's bank of statistics to pull out some figures on the circulation of North American daily newspapers from the *UNESCO Year Book* of 1996, and then some recent briefings on its publications from the OECD. All in all, I was able to gather an impressive amount of research data in less than an hour and without leaving my desk.

Now I don't for a moment suggest that this kind of information is going to put newspapers and the electronic media out of business. Most people want short, snappy reports preferably with pictures and the Parliament isn't providing that. Yet.

It will certainly soon be possible for Parliament to have available on its web site edited grabs, provided by its sound and vision people, of some of the more dramatic exchanges from that day's Question time. For the true aficionados of Parliament this could become required viewing, especially if it is accompanied by expert commentary by, say, a scholar-in-residence at the Senate.

The kind of information already available on the Internet is more likely in the short term to pose a threat to some of the specialist newsletters unless they respond by acknowledging that they need to provide further value in addition to the specialist information they already gather for clients. Otherwise, many of these clients might decide they can save money by having existing staff members trawl through the Parliament's home page each day to retrieve—for free—whatever parliamentary information they now get from expensive newsletter subscriptions.

I think we all understand that information is many things. Information is fact but information is also interpretation and assessment. This kind of information requires background knowledge, an understanding of context and the ability to weigh and appraise facts in a way that gives unique insight. That is what the media can do and in the future may be called upon to do considerably more of in order to complement the avalanche of purely factual information that will be increasingly available to us all.

There are many changes and trends in Parliament which deserve scrutiny and exploration. For instance, the rise of independents and of small parties has changed the way in which governments work. It has in fact made government much more dependent on parliamentary numbers and procedures than was the case when governments had parliamentary majorities and could get by using the weight of their numbers.

There is indeed a whole new repertoire the media can make its own. This is just one example. Just because Parliament is giving the media a run for its money when it comes to providing information, doesn't mean the battle to control the images is over. Not by a long shot. Or should that be a big byte?



Question — You were talking about the decline of the media in being able to present news and information. Could I suggest that, in an open democracy, that is something tremendously valuable. I think that the media had far too great a monopoly on power, in not only responding to and interpreting things in Parliament and so forth, but actually setting the agenda. I think that the decline, to some extent, in the power that the media wields is actually a good thing. I would actively encourage greater access to things like the Internet, to the televising of Parliament, because I think we are thinking people and we do have a capacity to be able to assess and appraise information as individuals and I believe it is a little bit arrogant for the media to purport that they are the only institution that is capable of doing that.

Dr Summers — I am not sure I am trying to suggest that the media has declined. I think what I was trying to suggest was that perhaps the balance of power between media and the Parliament had altered somewhat. I certainly think it is important that there be other sources of knowledge and therefore power, but I think the overall question of the extent to which the media determines agendas is a rather more complex one than might seem at first. When you think about the amount of effort that governments and political parties and business lobbyists and so on put into trying to manipulate the media, and the extent to which they succeed, the question of where these agendas come from, I think, is a rather more complex one than journalists simply sitting around thinking ‘oh well, let us have a go on Mabo today’, or ‘let us decide today’s issue is whatever’. These questions are ones we could debate and find examples and case studies of over a very long period of time. But the main point I would make in response to that is that I think we do acknowledge in democracies that the media does have a key role. It is called the fourth estate; it is regarded as a key, if not essential element, of the democratic process, which means that the press, the media as a whole, has responsibilities, and duties, in addition to simply exercising power. And of course, the more

commercial the media is, the more we need watch-guards to observe that power. But it is a huge question you have opened up and I probably could stand here and rave on for half an hour on it but there may well be some other people who want to make comments along those lines, or others, so that is all I will say for now.

Question — Just along those same lines if you do not mind, with the new building and the layout and everything you mentioned, the parliamentarians and staffers are increasingly isolated or able to isolate themselves from the media. I am just a young tacker, only been politically aware for ten years or so, but in that time I want to say that politicians have become isolated increasingly from public opinion. Do you think the role of this building itself and the increasing power of politicians to set the agenda where the media are concerned, has led to them becoming more isolated from the views of the public, given that the media is the arena in which politicians and the public interact?

Dr Summers — I know this Parliament House has been operating for almost ten years now, so it probably sounds pretty stupid to be waxing sentimental about the Old House. I was very amused to see reported in the press yesterday that Malcolm Fraser had made a speech saying he is very sorry he spent all that money and agreed to all this and he would like to go back to the old one. I do not know where that is coming from because he, together with his ministers, was one of the main forces insisting on this physical separation of government members from the media. They did not want to be bothered by journalists tripping over them and accosting them as they went to the loo or came out of their offices, and so he was the one who insisted on this separation, so it was pretty funny to see those remarks.

In the Old House there used to be the somewhat self-conscious perception that yes, this is, sort of like the *Titanic*, it is a completely unique, isolated experience, it has got nothing to do with the real world, and you know I think that was true. But if it was true of the old building, it is ten times more true of this building. You can walk into this building at eight or nine in the morning and not leave till midnight and everything you need is here. You can eat here, you can do your banking here, you can do your dry cleaning, all your friends are here, you can have lunch, you can have dinner with different people, you can go and have coffee, you can go to the post office, you never need to leave the building. As somebody who has spent a total of seven years in the old building and this one and has since spent a lot of time in other places, I do think the perceptions are somewhat artificial. I think that however much time you spend on the phone and however much time you might spend visiting other parts of the country (and most Canberra journalist do not travel except as part of an entourage with the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader, because it is the nature of the job that you do not travel outside Canberra very much except in those circumstances) it is very easy to become isolated and remote from the vast majority of people and it is one of the big problems of political coverage. It is interesting that the political parties, which of course are also based in Canberra, use research methods, focus groups and polling and what have you, to tap into what people are thinking.

Now in terms of members of Parliament, given that they all go back to their electorates each week and supposedly, particularly the House of Reps people, are in touch with the people who put them here, they should not really be in a position to be as isolated as perhaps the people who work in this building and never go to another part of Australia. So, I do not think the members of Parliament really have any excuse for being out of touch with the electorate.

If they are, it is because they are choosing not to listen or because they enjoy the luxury of a safe seat and do not have to worry.

Question — I just want to add a very small research footnote to Anne's very interesting paper today. Anne rightly said that the parliamentary home page represents a terrific boon to people doing research on Parliament. This is correct, but unfortunately it is only from inside Parliament House that you can actually access the online *Hansard* going back to 1981. If you are operating from outside Parliament, you can only access online *Hansard* from 1995, and this means a considerable handicap for people who want to do content analysis and look at the way the subject matter of parliamentary debate has been changing over time. At the moment, apparently, there simply are not the resources to make online *Hansard* from 1981 available from outside Parliament House, because all sorts of other things take priority, like of course home pages for MPs and other such things, but I trust that in the near future this issue of the needs of researchers are going to take slightly higher priority.

Dr Summers — I guess this is one of the intrinsic problems of having this extraordinary amount of information available. The more we have, the more we want, and the thought of even being able to photocopy *Hansard* a couple of years ago seemed to be pretty terrific and now we are annoyed if we cannot get as much as we want at home now. In fact I was trying to print out some *Hansards* from the Victorian Parliament yesterday, just to test the system, and unfortunately my computer did not have enough power to be able to do it and I had a transfer interrupted signal. If you look at the state parliaments too, some of their *Hansards* go back to 1991, others only go back to 1996 and some of them, the South Australian Parliament I think, do not have *Hansard* at all on their home pages yet.

Question — I was wondering if you think the media's coverage of women politicians, backbenchers and ministers and also women's issues, has changed in correlation with changes to the press gallery with more women becoming senior within the ranks of the press gallery?

Dr Summers — I think it has changed quite a lot in the last ten years. It was interesting that at the time I was Bureau Chief at the *Financial Review* there were actually three women bureau chiefs, Michelle Grattan at the *Age*, Gay Davidson at the *Canberra Times* and myself. There were a lot more women in the Gallery at that time than had been previously and everybody thought, well, isn't this great, but the culture was still such that if you wanted to do your job well, you had to go with the main stories. In the time I was at the *Financial Review*, I probably wrote two or three stories about subjects that happened to be close to my personal feelings, like women's refuges and so on, but they were not the sort of stories I could devote a lot of time to without people wondering seriously if I had gone off the rails and was not able to do the job properly. I think one of the things that has changed, for the better in my opinion, in the last few years, and maybe it is a reflection of there being more women in the Gallery but I do not think so, I think it is more a reflection of the change in the culture of the media generally, is that there are now specialist correspondents to cover those sorts of areas, particularly child care and other issues of interest to women. There is also much more demand from readers to know about these subjects and I think you also have to say that governments have sort of forced it on to the media. I recall when I was working for Paul Keating in the time of the 1993 federal election, and he announced some very major child care initiatives as part of an economic statement, it was part of my job to brief the press on those changes, and all the journalists said to me, well, look, this is just ridiculous. Why is he raising child care in a really important speech about the economy? And I said, trying to make

the point that child care is an economic issue, women go out to work, they need childcare, we are trying to broaden the understanding of economic issues; and it was very difficult to persuade a lot of journalists that that was a legitimate place to talk about child care. I think in the four or five years since then that there is more acceptance that child care is an economic issue, and in fact, this admittedly and unfortunately is in an environment of cutbacks, the issue is now being covered in a serious fashion in a way that would not have happened in the past, and I think that is a good thing.

The other point I make is that we do have at the moment a record number of women members of Parliament, most of whom are on the conservative side, and I am quite surprised at how little coverage there is of those members. Whether this is because they are not doing anything and therefore there is nothing to report, or whether the press is ignoring them, which I think is unlikely, I do find it interesting that some of the changes in women's policy which are coming out of this particular administration are occurring at a time at which there are a record number of women members. That is an irony that I will leave others to comment on. But I think generally the coverage has improved and I think is more diverse and provides a better reflection of the world the way it really is.

Question — Perceptions are very important, and prior to the previous election I was in South Australia doing consultations on constitutional issues and what came out were the very strong perceptions of some people that Parliament is not representing them. I would like you to answer a question on your experience of both the media and the Parliament, and that is, why is so much time spent on the negative things like the rorts etc. which could be attended to in a very short time, and less on what is required to develop and run the country? The perception is that there seems to be so much time spent on what is not really considered important, and this is losing a lot of respect for politicians. So are you able to share with me some of the psychology behind that, because what does zoom out to the community out there, to the outback, to the regions, is question time and such things. As you are aware, so much time was spent on one senator's alleged rorts, when the view out there is it could have been resolved with a police investigation that could have happened in a very short time, and if it was Aboriginal people they would have been locked up in five minutes. So could you just share with me some of the psychology?

Dr Summers — I think it is a very important question you raise, the question of who determines what is news and who determines what stories will run. One of the points I tried to make is that there is an amazing, and I think, unfortunate uniformity in approach, so that you do get the same story and the same angle on the story often ad nauseum in every single piece of media. I think that people are sick of that, and I think the evidence of that is that newspaper readership is declining, and I heard on the radio this morning that even the number of people watching the very popular six o'clock news on television is declining. People are turning off the mainstream media. That needs to be investigated as to why, but I would hazard a guess that people are a bit sick of only hearing a very narrow band of news. I am not saying that we should be Pollyanna-ish and provide good news; people say they want to read good news, but they do not, they will not buy newspapers that are full of Pollyanna-type stories. But I do think you can argue for a broader range of stories, and I think we could give more coverage to perhaps what we might call the uplifting, the leadership, the vision, the way forward. I think a lot of people are very perturbed about the direction of this country at the moment and are searching for ideas, wanting to know what people are doing in a wide range of areas, and the media could do more of that, still fulfilling its responsibility to report the news as it sees fit.

But I do think that the definition of what that news is should be subjected to a bit more debate and self-analysis. I agree with you.