The Influence of Parliamentary Location and Space on Australia's Political News Media[*]

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I am pleased to be able to participate in this series of Senate lectures and thank the organisers for the invitation. Although most of my political work has been involved with the House of Representatives, I have had some contact with the senior chamber. When I joined the press gallery in the early 1960s my first tasks included covering Question Time in the Senate. It was not a highly prized assignment and in those days the pickings were pretty lean. The Senate was very much a subordinate arm of constitutional government with the press gallery mesmerised by the exhibition of powerful executive government daily in the House of Representatives chamber through the powerful political persona of Robert Gordon Menzies. The discrepancy between the naked use of the forms of Parliament to reinforce executive power in one chamber, and the moribund nature of the other, was only too evident. In the intervening forty years, the role and authority of the Senate has been transformed. The strength of the executive power, however, remains potently evident within the parliamentary building. A principal theme of this lecture is how the executive became so powerful within the parliamentary framework and how this has been reflected in the evolution of Australian political journalism.

Although the publicity for this lecture identifies me correctly as working with a group of senior Labor politicians, my first attempt to get a job on parliamentary staff was actually with a distinguished Senate leader, Sir William Spooner. It was during the credit squeeze of 1961 when there had been a flurry of what today would be called 'downsizing' in the Sydney press. Spooner was then Minister for National Development, a crucial portfolio in the major growth decades of the 1950s and 60s. The job promised plenty of travel, most of it to mines, irrigation works, and beef roads but anywhere seemed preferable to Sydney in a major credit squeeze.

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When I went for an interview with Sir William's office, I was startled to be questioned at some length about my military record. It was stressed very strongly that Spooner favoured a military background when selecting his male staff. I had been a rather undistinguished recruit minor in a national service battalion under the old call-up system, and found it hard to reconcile my own war-like capability with what Sir William expected.

Subsequently, my principal referee, a celebrated Australian war correspondent, threatened to knock my head off for posing, as he put it, as 'a war hero who had won a Military Cross wading ashore under heavy fire to establish the British beachhead at Salerno in the Sicily campaign.' Another Lloyd had actually applied for the Spooner job and we had both nominated the same referee. It was all sorted out eventually, the heroic Lloyd got the job, and I stayed on the dole. Sir William had an enviable reputation for intensive demands on his staff and, like Billy Hughes, he ran through a lot of press secretaries. The war hero did not last long with Spooner. He may have found the Salerno beach-head more congenial. Five years later I was recruited to work briefly as private secretary to another Senate leader, Don Willesee, so, in a sense, justice was done.

I have been asked today to pick up some of the themes I explored in a rather brisk study written ten years ago as part of a federal Parliament publishing program for the Australian bicentennial. The book's rather unambitious scope is indicated by its soporific title, *Parliament and the Press*, which doesn't give much away. One of the issues I considered was the impact of space and location on the functioning of the Australian Parliament, the government (or constitutional executive) and the press (now more accurately, the news media). My essential argument can be summarised as follows. British constitutional conventions, and Australia's written constitution, propose a constitutional dispensation based on a separation of powers between the three great institutions of Parliament, executive and judiciary. The press, which is neither dealt with specifically in the British constitutional conventions nor identified specifically in the Australian constitution, has mostly observed this separation in organising its resources to gather and present political news. As the Australian constitution has evolved, however, this traditional pattern has been distorted in the Australian experience by peculiar factors of location and space.

Except for the twenty-seven years when the Australian Parliament was based in Melbourne, Australia's executive government has been a tangible presence in the Parliament, as distinct from a constitutional presence, because of arrangements which accommodate it and its retinue within parliamentary space. In short, ministers have their personal offices in Parliament House and cabinet meets there. Initially, this was an arrangement of convenience to meet urgent necessities arising from the movement of Parliament, executive and press to the new capital of Canberra. Because the presumed temporary Parliament House at Canberra lasted for sixty years, the executive became so embedded in parliamentary space that it has proven impossible to extricate. Thus, the arrangement of what I have labelled the 'Executive in Parliament' has been perpetuated in this new, and hopefully permanent, Parliament House occupied in 1988.

When Australia's first Parliament assembled in full session in Melbourne in 1901, it inherited the splendid parliamentary building of the Victorian colonial parliament. This stately parliamentary edifice at the top of Bourke Street was restored to Victoria in 1927 after the Parliament moved to Canberra. It remains the state Parliament House of Victoria, an impressive building by any criteria and still maintaining the most elegant parliamentary space

in Australia. It is an interesting point of press gallery practice that for a time the press was actually accommodated on the floor of the House of Representatives chamber, a highly unusual procedure in the conventional Westminster format.

The practice and procedure of the federal Parliament in Melbourne were heavily influenced by the model established by the colonial Parliament. With the new federal press gallery, this meant the adoption of the rules and conventions of a powerful colonial state press gallery system. Perhaps the closest Australia has ever come to a genuinely political press, in the sense of a press ethos and practice largely shaped by its political coverage, particularly of Parliament, emerged through the combination of a strong and increasingly assertive Victorian state governance with powerful, politically oriented newspapers. By the time of federation the Melbourne press—particularly the *Age* and the *Argus*—exerted an influence which they were able to sustain, even enhance, in the new national Parliament. While the *Sydney Morning Herald* was predominant in New South Wales colonial politics, it was not able to match the logistical and location advantages of the Melbourne dailies. Indeed, it might be argued that these journals retained an ascendancy in national politics even after the Parliament left Melbourne, and in some degree until World War II.

These Melbourne dailies provided resources and facilities for the interstate press in Melbourne. Without technological support in particular, it would have been very difficult for the press in other states to maintain even a rudimentary daily coverage. The tyranny of communications logistics also facilitated the development of news agencies servicing particularly the non-daily and provincial press with federal political material. In terms of organisation and procedure, within the Parliament, however, the press gallery largely followed established colonial practice.

With the small scale of Australia's federal administration, at least until World War I, the executive was easy to cover relative to the Parliament, where the principal reporting effort was focussed. The executive was largely housed in accommodation near but separate from Parliament House, and the federal cabinet also convened there. In the foundation years, the Prime Minister usually held as well a major portfolio, invariably Treasury or External Affairs. Consequently, his personal office was attached to the relevant department.

Remarkably, the Prime Minister shared an office with his private secretary during this early period, an arrangement which must have put leaking to the press at a premium. In practice, this relative subjugation of the prime ministerial role meant that the Prime Minister got most of his press exposure through the parliamentary forum, as did the members of his cabinet. In short, national politics were represented and reported through the Parliament rather than through any specific executive structure. Not until 1911 were the rudiments of an independent Prime Minister's Department established, and the creation of executive publicity structures was essentially a function of the Great War and the years immediately following.

The ascendancy of Parliament as the overriding source of national political news also began to weaken during World War I. This was partly due to increasing executive power but also to the emergence of the military structure as a major news source. The turbulent party politics of the war, particularly the conscription split, and the defection of W.M. Hughes from Labor to head a new national government, were played out substantially in the parliamentary forum.

It is a fair conclusion that the Parliament still dominated the gathering of political news, despite the cumulative growth of the executive's newsworthiness. In particular, the projection

of a political leadership persona through what we know today as ‘spin’ or ‘image-making’ was accomplished largely through parliamentary forms and spaces. This parliamentary news predominance was achieved in a context of strict separation of powers between parliamentary, executive and judicial functions, in accordance with the Westminster constitutional system. Indeed, this predominance of Parliament as a news source was typical of the Westminster system, at least until the late 1920s.

From the early 1920s, the balance of press power in Melbourne began to change with the emergence of Keith Murdoch’s *Melbourne Herald* group, extending to the morning press through the creation of what became the spectacularly successful *Sun Pictorial*. This was reflected to some degree in the press gallery through the substantial sales of both Murdoch papers, the evening *Herald* and the morning *Sun*, although in terms of overall political influence and persuasiveness the *Age* and *Argus* were still predominant. Murdoch was by far the most important and influential former member of the Melbourne gallery, partly through his journalistic abilities but also through the cultivation of close political links with the Labor prime ministers, Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes.

Murdoch served as a *de facto* publicity adviser to both leaders, parlaying these contacts into familiar relationships with British politicians, military leaders and newspaper proprietors, particularly Lord Northcliffe, who fostered Murdoch’s early entrepreneurial development. Other notable journalists from the Melbourne gallery were Lloyd Dumas and W. Farmer White, both of whom moved from political journalism to play major roles in the establishment of prime ministerial and government press publicity and relations. Dumas later became head of the *Adelaide Advertiser* and one of Murdoch’s most trusted subordinates in the *Melbourne Herald* group. This imposition of a countervailing intermediary between the gallery and the executive developed gradually from 1919–20.

It is an interesting speculation what might have happened to Australian government and politics if the national capital had remained in Melbourne. In policy and administrative terms, it could be argued that the move to Canberra was made at the worst possible time. Very likely, the public policy of the Great Depression would have been conducted with greater competence because the Parliament and executive would have remained closely linked to the administration which mostly stayed in Melbourne, as did the headquarters of much of the nation’s corporate strength and the national trade union movement.

The political and financial controllers of the United Australia Party which largely dictated politics and public policy during the 1930s were also in Melbourne, which would have made an elegant capital in the memorial marble tradition. The move to Canberra split the close linkage between the executive and military command, ensuring that direction of the war was divided between the new capital and the old. The strains and inefficiencies caused to the war effort by this division were incalculable.

In terms of the actual move to Canberra, the impact on traditional relationships between Parliament, executive and press were serious enough. For the gallery there was some benefit in the levelling of the playing field by the removal of the substantial advantage the Melbourne Parliament had given to the great Melbourne newspapers and their allies. In theory, at least, all newspapers and the few news agencies covering federal politics in Canberra faced similar levels of comparative disadvantage. In short, they shared problems of distance, communication, space and location. This relative equality, however, was eroded by the rapid growth of Murdoch’s *Herald* and *Weekly Times* group, which annexed major newspapers in

all capital cities except Sydney. This concentration created a bloc of national political influence in the gallery matching the supplanted supremacy of the great Melbourne dailies.

The shift to Canberra had been planned on the basis that the spatial separation of government institutions would replicate that of Melbourne. The executive would have its own wings with the eventual expectation of moving to department offices as the public service trickled into Canberra. The Parliament would have the show-piece of a new but temporary Parliament House. While modest accommodation had been included for the press in the Parliament, it was tacitly accepted that the newspapers and agencies would hire or build offices in the few crude urban centres. Homes would be built for permanent journalists, and transients in for the parliamentary session would stay in government hostels. In short, the pattern of coverage and accommodation of executive, Parliament and press would largely maintain the patterns of Melbourne. Seemingly, some spirit of constitutional determinism would maintain the traditional balance. For a variety of reasons this failed to happen.

For a start, it proved impossible to get the executive government even as far from the parliamentary building as West and East Blocks adjoining the parliamentary building. Cabinet meetings in the nearby administrative buildings proved impracticable and were moved to Parliament House. This combination of executive and parliamentary function in one building meant that accommodation provided to ministers as parliamentarians was appropriated for executive purposes. Inevitably, the basic offices consumed additional space for public servants and staff. Most ministers had no departmental offices and the few that did found them inconvenient to use. The administration came to Parliament House and so also did the press. What were intended essentially as common rooms solely for press covering parliamentary proceedings were reorganised into offices in a manner not dissimilar to the British land enclosures.

This assumption of parliamentary space was encouraged by parliamentary policies which rejected any notion that the press should pay rental for the accommodation. This, it was argued, would give the press tenants' rights in Parliament. Such a principle was not applied to the executive offices, presumably because ministers also held rights as parliamentarians. With Canberra deficient in eating, drinking and diversionary facilities, much of the social life and entertainment were focussed on Parliament House. Essential services such as barbers and bookmakers appeared in the Parliamentary building. In short, a political culture emerged embracing all who worked in Parliament House, a culture that did not change materially over sixty years, whose elements were as discernible in 1988 as they had been in 1927.

What impact did this convergence of political social factors in the new capital have on the press? The tangible separation of Parliament and executive had allowed the press to apply established criteria of newsworthiness, or news value, to gauge the measure of coverage given to each institution. In Melbourne, the test of newsworthiness had mostly favoured the Parliament, although with a pronounced shift to the executive in the 1920s.

Very likely, this drift was maintained, perhaps even gathered momentum, after the transfer to Canberra. Changing news values would have partly dictated this. With changing styles of news presentation from the early 1920s, together with the gradual emergence of broadcast news, pressures were already on the old broadsheet dailies to transform their conventional news values. It is the extent of the shift in news value from Parliament to executive, rather than its occurrence, that is at issue in the Australian context. It has to be asked whether the conjunction of press and executive in Australia's Parliament House at Canberra distorted, and

eventually stifled, the reporting of traditional parliamentary proceedings. In short, it is argued that the Australian press moved from predominantly reporting Parliament to overwhelmingly reporting what the executive said and did in the parliamentary building. Consequently, the Parliamentary institution diminished in prestige and newsworthiness because the executive was lodged squarely within its bounds.

The point may be amplified a little by comparison. In the United States, the constitution separates the institutions of executive, Congress and Supreme Court. The constitution gives considerably more discretionary power to the executive, through the elected President, than Westminster systems convey. It is reasonable to expect, then, that the President gets the greater share of press attention at the expense of the two other institutions. Yet the Congress and Supreme Court are not obliterated from media coverage and attention. They remain highly newsworthy. Each has its own institutional space and its own press gallery to cover it. Congress in fact has distinct sub-galleries performing specialist news media functions. This separation of constitutional and news media function guarantees that Congress and Court get a fair share of news media and attention, although less in proportion than space and broadcast time going to the President. Physical separation of space gives perhaps an even fairer balance in the United Kingdom, where the coverage given to Westminster in session is comparable to what Number Ten and Whitehall receive.

The exercise of permissive occupancy, even squatting rights, by the executive in Parliament House has been detrimental both to the Parliament and to the perceptions of Parliament as reflected by the news media. It has also, I suggest, been more directly harmful to the news media in the power it has given the executive government to manipulate news. Of course, there would have been executive manipulation of the press even if the institutions had maintained physical separation and a proprietary executive press corps had emerged. This would have been less damaging to the Parliament, however, because it would target journalists who did not cover Parliament. Manipulation by the executive would then have depended on the relative advantage of the executive in direct bargaining with journalists over the news agenda. This would have provided a basically fairer contest because the power of the executive would not have been reinforced by the traditional privileges of the parliamentary institution. Thus, the advantage that the executive already possesses is, in the Australian context, accentuated by the ancient privileges and conventions of the Parliament.

If this seems far-fetched, the sceptic need go no further than Sir Robert Menzies' second prime ministership (1949–65) for examples. Menzies' expertise in news media control lay in the combination of executive manipulation with parliamentary precept and precedent. For example, executive manipulation could be achieved by the technical device of not holding press conferences except in extreme circumstances, such as a close-run election. Conversely, Menzies could call on the precept that material related to important matters of state had first to be conveyed to the Parliament before it could be disclosed to the news media. Where this hoary, and somewhat dubious, tradition was applied when Parliament wasn't sitting, delays were inevitable, yet the fault lay with Parliament rather than the executive. Menzies had a very deft hand indeed when it suited him to sustain his executive fiat with the reinforcement of parliamentary tradition.

There were some bright spots for gallery journalists in the Menzies years, largely through the ingenuity of individual journalists in finding ways around the Menzies log-jam. In general, they were wretched years for the gallery's development as a responsible and responsive news media institution. So also had been the Depression years of the 1930s where, retrospectively,

gallery journalists conceded that, shackled by the conventions of objectivity generally accepted in that period, their coverage of the Great Depression had been grossly inadequate. These failures were balanced by periods of excellent journalism.

Unquestionably, press gallery journalists did a fine job with their reporting of government and administration during World War II, both in what they wrote and in what they concealed, the confidential material they knew but did not write because of national security. A significant part of the gallery work during World War II, however, was accomplished by a small group of senior journalists who worked as much in Melbourne, where the military headquarters were centred, and on the road with Prime Minister Curtin. It was not, therefore, primarily involved with either the Parliament or the executive in Canberra.

After Menzies retired in the mid '60s, the gallery had a period of vigorous renewal, a resurgence counterpointing in many ways the gradual decline of the long-entrenched Liberal government. Harold Holt and John Gorton were much more moderate in their approach to the news media, particularly the television and photojournalism elements. Many gallery members who had endured the Menzies dominance departed and their successors were younger and more innovative, prepared to try new forms of journalism such as satirical comment, a genre that would have been unthinkable under Menzies. Finance and economics journalism began to strengthen, originating with the establishment of the *Financial Review* gallery office in the early 1960s but spreading enthusiastically to other major newspapers. The television journalists began to conquer the daunting challenges of transmitting material to networks based in distant capital cities. It was an era of supreme newsworthiness, with the Vietnam War and the rejuvenation of the ALP, culminating with the election in 1972 of the Whitlam government. Overall, the period 1966–72 would rate highly in any review of gallery performance since 1927. By this time, however, the limitations of the Old Parliament House were increasingly manifest.

It is somewhat unclear just how long the temporary Parliament House was intended to last, but a reasonable estimate would probably be about twenty years. Its planners and builders would have been startled to learn that it staggered on for sixty years. Certainly the Depression and World War II delayed the transition to a permanent building, but there seems no reason why a new building should not have signified the development decade of the 1950s. It is surprising in retrospect that Menzies' love of the parliamentary institution should not have spurred him to invest in a new parliamentary space. Menzies was not impervious to the planning and development needs of the national capital, whose bounds he once boasted he could walk around each night before bed. It has been suggested that Menzies preferred the old building because of his easy mastery of it, but he would have been just as formidable a parliamentarian in any chamber.

Even when a firm decision had been taken to build a new Parliament House, squabbles over its site took more than a decade to resolve. Planning and construction took more than another decade as the old building withered. The transient building had never been envisaged as a work of elegance and splendour, but for much of its existence it had a genteel, gentleman's club ambience. Sustained over-use had reduced it by the early 1980s to what was effectively public squalor. Yet this decaying and increasingly unworkable monument has become etched in public memory as the landmark of a great period of Australian government, particularly for the news media.

Earlier this year [1998], there was a remarkable effusion of public nostalgia for this constitutional artefact, as venue for the Constitutional Convention. Numerous veterans of Parliament, executive, news media and staff gathered for a final wallow in past glories. Much of the sentimentality from the news media appeared to be generated by journalists who had come to the parliamentary gallery mostly in its final decade. Reasonably perhaps, they concluded that Parliament had always reflected an exuberant tempo, easy proximity to the greats of the executive, and a relatively benign, even licentious, administration.

In practice, however, the parliamentary environment had invariably been strictly regulated, particularly during the Menzies era, with the authoritarian control of Speaker Archie Cameron complementing the more subtle manipulations of Menzies. This Parliamentary Dance to the Music of Time had a pronounced epochal quality to it, the heightened experience and frenetic quality of an era's passing.

The news media was also seduced by the impact of a political milieu which was decidedly to their professional advantage. It was the period when the relationship between the Parliament and the executive government was at its most distorted. The supremacy of the executive seemed absolute, even in matters which were properly the prerogative of the Parliament. An example is the executive response to an attempt by the Parliament to move the press gallery partly out of the parliamentary building to accommodate an influx of new members. A widely accepted version of this incident, largely confirmed by Anne Summers in her address to this forum last year, holds that the move was stopped by the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, on the grounds that a press exodus from the Parliament would cost his government the next election. If this is correct then it reflects a sadly diminished Parliament, an institution historically at its lowest ebb.

Inevitably, the contempt of the executive for the parliamentary institution which had so generously housed it was reflected in press coverage which played down the parliamentary institution and elevated the executive. Even in a period when the Senate particularly was in a period of revival and committee systems were increasingly effective, the coverage and interpretation by the news media of the Australian Parliament was at its most feeble. While the executive dictated the political agenda, as it did ruthlessly through the 1970s and '80s, the significance of the parliamentary institution continued to waver.

By the late 1980s, the restoration of a proper balance between executive and Parliament in the parliamentary building, particularly as reflected in the news media, was long overdue. Fortuitously, it came in the new Parliament House. Despite the architectural quality of the building, its many fine spaces and superb internal light, it pleased few of the new occupants, but this antipathy soon faded. Despite an abiding affection for the old premises, the parliamentarians, the executive and their staff soon adjusted to the new building. Why wouldn't they? In terms of comfort, space, resources, facilities, and convenience, it was infinitely superior. Although the executive was still housed in the parliamentary building, in some splendour, a measure of parity was restored to its relationship with the Parliament. The quality of the parliamentary spaces, lobbies, offices, party and committee rooms did much to revive the prestige and self-esteem of the parliamentarians who were not in the executive. Significantly, the Parliament was able to affirm and entrench traditional curbs on access and movement of the news media within the parliamentary building.

Unquestionably, the ethos and structure of the Old Parliament House was more attuned to the practice of print and radio journalism than any other public building in Australia, perhaps

even the world. The resentment of journalists plucked from the centre of the action to a controlled periphery was a resentment not mollified by more space and facilities. A painful process of adjustment had to be made to the new ambience and amended conventions of parliamentary function. The change of parliamentary domicile also brought user-pays charges for the first time, still below market rentals but irksome for institutions and individuals used to a free ride. Where once the argument had been that press payment for space would produce tenants' rights, no additional rights accrued when payments were eventually applied.

Nor did the advantages of space and facilities last for long. The planners of the gallery had not anticipated the spectacular growth spiral in both number of institutions and journalists from the early 1990s. In part, a substantial increase in space created its own demand. The major newspaper offices, the ABC, and the television networks, doubled and in some cases tripled the size of their gallery staffs. The sprouting of a range of diversified news interests outside the mainstream sparked pressures for individual and small-unit representation which the gallery, to its credit, sought to accommodate. Space was also awarded to news agency services, mainly commercial and financial, which proliferated in the 1990s. A cursory look at the current gallery list is enough to confirm its formidable mass and growth. After less than ten years, the gallery has virtually filled the primary space allocated to last it in perpetuity. This raises the question of whether the gallery offices, as distinct from common accommodation for journalists covering Parliament, should be retained in Parliament at all.

The only firm proposals for relocating the press outside the Canberra Parliament were made by Sir Keith Murdoch in the late 1940s. Murdoch, whose attitudes were fashioned by his work in the Melbourne gallery, felt it appropriate that journalists should have an independent existence outside the conventions and limitations of parliamentary space. This would enable them in some degree to provide separate coverage of Parliament and executive, even though the two constitutional institutions still existed side by side. Murdoch received little support from his proprietorial colleagues or federal politicians and his proposal for a separate press building lapsed and never revived.

I was interested to read in Anne Summers' lecture here last year that she had advocated the removal of the *Financial Review* office from the gallery to space outside the Parliament. She felt that this was necessary to restore competitiveness among gallery journalists, and destroy an entrenched uniformity in professional attitudes to political journalism. It is a viewpoint for which I have much sympathy. As with Sir Keith Murdoch, there was a lack of interest from Dr Summers' superiors and colleagues. It seems increasingly likely, however, that the accumulating pressures on space and growing numbers of potential entrants will force such a resolution, whether wholly or in part, upon the gallery. Without the cosy propinquity between executive and gallery that defeated any proposal to vacate the old building, such a solution would possibly succeed.

This issue aside, how has the gallery adjusted to the more temperate and commodious environment of the new building? I stress here that I am not speaking from direct experience. I have not worked in the press gallery since 1964, and I have never worked in this building at all. I doubt that I have been inside its walls more than seven or eight times, including today. My judgements are based on tentative assessment of outcomes as reflected in news product.

Despite some grumbling to the contrary, I would rate the gallery quite highly in terms of ethical journalism. Of the 1000 or so adjudications of the Australian press gallery since 1976, few are relevant to unethical conduct by gallery journalists. The long-established judicial

sanctions of the Media Alliance's Code of Ethics, to the best of my knowledge, have not been invoked against gallery journalists in recent years. Nor am I aware of any major disciplinary problems involving the gallery committee and its extended membership. The conduct of the crucial relationship between the gallery and the parliamentary officers in a difficult period of adjustment seems to have been sound, if not without tensions. I know of no major breaches by journalists of parliamentary privilege or gross misconduct within the new Parliament House. Nor am I aware of any recent major defamation or *sub judice* contempt actions against federal political journalists. There may be lapses I have missed, but overall it seems that the gallery's record for ethical journalism, conduct within the Parliament, and accurate journalism, at least in the legal sense, has been creditable.

I referred earlier to the fixation on the Old Parliament House, not only as the fulcrum of political news, but also as a principal place of entertainment and social activity for the hundreds of people who worked there. The shift to the new building broke this linkage forever. The developing cafe and boulevard life of areas close to the new building have delivered much more sophisticated diversionary options to the new generation of Parliament House workers, including journalists. Even a superficial look at the new entertainment areas of Manuka and Kingston late at night suggests a high patronage by parliamentarians, staff and journalists. This represents a maturity greatly to be welcomed, moving the incessant social activity welded to politicking out of the parliament institution.

The new building has been responsible for a blossoming of political and parliamentary television news. Television journalism was particularly ill-suited to the oddities and inconveniences of the old building, with poor studio spaces, shabby backgrounds, lack of natural light, and inadequate connections to network offices. Contrast, for example, the dim, dingy images from the Old Parliament House during the Constitutional Convention with the generally luminous pictures from the new chambers and lobbies. Indeed, the lighting in the current chambers often gives sharply defined frontal facial images distinctly unflattering to parliamentarians caught squarely on camera. The long-delayed access to sound and visual bites for broadcast journalism has been utilised to animate and vitalise television news in particular. Although not based on rigorous content analysis, my feeling is that newspaper coverage of parliamentary proceedings has increased, even without the big-bang occasions of uncertain Senate majorities.

Generally, assessments of gallery performance have missed what I consider the most encouraging development of recent years, the emerging of comprehensive background reporting across the spectrum of public policy. I would say that public policy can now justly be added to the conventional breakdown of political journalism into covering Parliament and covering the executive. This has not been confined to the voluminous coverage by specialist economics and business writers which has developed consistently over almost forty years. Rather it extends across a broad range of public policy areas which would have been very lightly covered, if at all. I cite particularly the communications area, where the quality of extended background and analysis has been of very high quality in recent years.

What about political comment? I am often surprised by the depth of ignorance even senior politicians display about the history of news media and its practice. Particularly irksome is the frequently quoted dictum that journalists should scrupulously separate fact and comment. There have been one or two well co-ordinated critiques on this subject in recent months. Presumably this separation applies only to print journalists. Television journalism is able to maintain a balance between fact and opinion because of program differentiation: a split

between news (fact) and current affairs (news and comment). For print journalism the issues are rather different.

While print was the dominant news medium, the reporting of news was dictated for many years by what was called the *objectivity principle*. Essentially, this provided that material should not be reported unless it could be confirmed by at least one identifiable source. There was even a fashionable doctrine of *triangulation*, the notion that news should not be reported unless it could be confirmed by three sources. Fact, under the objectivity canons, was confined to the news columns; comment or opinion to leaders or editorials.

All of this sounds perfectly reasonable, but in terms of getting at the truth of events rather than their superficial connotations, the objectivity principle is a hazard. If all you can report is only what you can source, without the freedom to interpret or comment, then what you present objectively may be a pack of lies. The reporting of Stalin and Hitler scrupulously adhered to the objectivity principle, with reporters replicating word for word what they were told or what they were given. US journalists who had long suffered under the shackles of strictly objective journalism finally got sick of it during the heyday of Senator Joe McCarthy. By reporting only what McCarthy said or released in press statements, they obscured the essential truth that the man was a dangerous demagogue. They turned against the conventions and exposed McCarthy by interpretative journalism and comment.

In Australia the news services of the ABC were wedded for many years to the objectivity canons. In 1971, its journalists in the press gallery found themselves in the ludicrous predicament of not being able to report the deposition of Prime Minister, John Gorton, in the 7pm news bulletin, because they could not source it. The ABC news journalists were scooped by the current affairs program *This Day Tonight* which followed the news at 7.30pm. Its journalists had no inhibitions about putting Gorton's overthrow to air, although there had been no formal political announcements.
Politicians who preach a pious separation of fact and comment seem to be basing their strictures on newspapers as journals of record, a concept that has been extinct at least since the 1920s. Even when the journals of record were at their peak, they published only a fraction of the news and information that was available. Many contemporary newspapers still do a creditable job of publishing a lot of material for the record. Already, however, the bulk of the task of providing any record has passed over to the Internet which does an incomparably better job than any newspaper could ever do. Why should a newspaper try to build up some sort of a record on, say, Wik, when there are thousands of pages easily accessible on the World Wide Web? Those who proclaim a rigid separation of fact and opinion in the news pages give the impression that their only news reading is back copies of the now-extinct Melbourne *Argus*.

The contemporary reality is that print news writing has moved decisively towards interpretative journalism, establishing comment and opinion on a firm basis of fact. In many ways, this follows the legal notion of fair comment as a defence for defamation, the writing of comment and opinion on the basis of accurate fact, which is clearly indicated in the story. A retreat to the strict canons of objectivity as advocated by some political pundits would be immensely damaging to good and truthful journalism.

Having largely avoided anecdotage so far, let me end with a brief personal account of a consultancy I did some years ago for the planners of the Old Parliament House Museum. In particular, I was asked to make suggestions on what might be done to preserve areas which

were relevant to the history of the press in Parliament House. Not many of my specific proposals were adopted, but the preservation of part of the old press gallery area was accomplished some years later.

With an official of the prospective museum, I made an extended tour of the deserted chambers and lobbies, arriving at last at the old Prime Minister's suite. I found to my astonishment that the office had not been touched since Bob Hawke left over two years before. Among the debris and artefacts remaining in his office was the blackboard on which the Prime Minister's daily appointments were chalked. The list was fairly typical: one or two early morning appointments; a sub-cabinet committee meeting, a full caucus meeting. The last item listed was a 12.30pm luncheon appointment which read simply: 'Lunch—Brian Bourke'. The spectacle of a successful Labor Prime Minister and a soon to be disgraced Labor Premier sharing a last supper in an increasingly deserted building epitomised for me in many ways the fugitive spirit of the place. I strongly urged that the board be kept in place as a significant historical memento but I imagine it has been erased. A pity! I hope the two old spectres shared a good lunch.

Question — You spoke about the influence of the three buildings on the gallery. As somebody who works in the gallery here and knows the Old Parliament House as well, I think you were a bit hard on the Old Parliament House and a bit soft on this place. I am one of those who regard this as a very neo-fascist building in design and intent in which democracy has been the loser. You do not have that wonderful Kings Hall mixture of politicians and people. Here everybody is quarantined, everybody has separate entrances, politicians are very much kept away from the people, the people kept away from the politicians and it is very much like a resort forever out of season for most of the year, with very long corridors.

But in regard to the press gallery, you did talk about the improvement in the ethical conduct, and I got the impression you suggested that was partly because of the transference to this building. In fact, that would have happened anyway, wouldn't it? Journalists are better educated, they have come from a different stream. The old journalist of your generation and my generation have drunk themselves to death or had their heart attacks and have gone.

You did not mention the other parliament house we might have had on the shore of the lake, the Holford parliament house, which obviously was inspired by Westminster and Thames-side location. I wonder whether that might have produced a more democratic sort of parliament house than this edifice that we are in today?

Professor Lloyd — I was a supporter of the parliament house on the lake, I think it was a terrible tragedy that it was not there. I have always been extremely dirty on the processes that put it up here where it was never intended to be.

I note all your comments about this building. As I say, I have never worked here and that might produce a totally different attitude to it. I am essentially looking at outcomes, trying to judge from my approach to reading newspapers and other news material. What I am really saying, is that this new Parliament House is producing, I think, a better balance between the

executive and the Parliament. Now whether that is based on the sort of sterility and separatism that you are talking about, I do not know. I am also saying that it is reflected in press coverage which has improved and also is giving a fairer balance of the elements of the constitutional system; in particular, putting a better perspective on the two chambers of the Parliament, and also now improving public policy journalism. I am looking at outcomes rather than individual discomforts or the impact on, I suppose, the 'things ain't what they used to be' kind of syndrome.

With regard to the press gallery, I understand it is almost now back to being very close to its peak accommodation capacity, and I do think that ultimately the problems will have to be faced, with the press moving out of this building, either wholly or in part. Sir Keith Murdoch did suggest that in the late 1940s, but it was never done. So, basically I am sympathetic to what you are saying, but it was inevitable at some time or other that the problem would have to be faced, and that we would have to go back to a system where the parliamentary officers have the final control. They lost it completely down in the other place, not surprisingly. They just could not contain it.

Question — Professor Lloyd, I am wondering to what extent you think the press or the media, electronic and print, has contributed and perhaps is contributing, to the decline in the public respect for the Parliament as an institution and what do you see as the role of the media in perhaps trying to redress this situation?

Professor Lloyd — I find that a fairly difficult question to answer. It is something I have never given a great deal of thought to. I suppose my concern has really been with news media practice and news media content. If anything, I would feel the revival of parliamentary reporting, and the spread of good public policy reporting, as well as the factors mentioned of better educated journalists, more ethical conduct, and the disappearance of much of the worst of the tabloid traditions, would in themselves certainly improve the status of the press and the news media over time.

I do not think the decline in public respect for Parliament is really the fault of the news media. I think it is a reflection of very serious problems with the ethical conduct of parliamentarians. We have never had a worse era, I suggest, than in the last ten years. To suggest that Menzies would have had to spend a lot of his time checking on the financial interests of his ministers would be totally improbable. Similarly of Curtin, although there was a degree of ministerial corruption in the Labor government at the end of the war, which largely went unpunished. You just would not have got that to any degree in previous eras. It is now a major problem for every government in the country. The ceaseless, factual coverage of ICAC [Independent Commission Against Corruption] in Sydney seems to indicate a fairly disgraceful abuse on the facts given. Four or five ministers go out virtually every time there is a new government.

There is no doubt that there is a significant degree of public corruption involving politicians. I hate to put it in that way, but it is very difficult to reach any other interpretation and I think that really is what is dragging the reputation of Parliament and the politicians down. I do not see any immediate corrective to it.

Question — Can you please expand on this idea of public policy journalism? Does the gallery, in your mind, focus too much on the politics and too little on the policy?

Professor Lloyd — What I'm referring to is the expansion of comment sections or interpretative sections in the major newspapers, particularly the *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald,* and *Australian*. The introduction of big new sections such as 'Focus' in the *Sydney Morning Herald* means you now have much more scope there for this kind of reporting. Also there is the enhanced size of the Friday edition of the *Financial Review,* the introduction of the Saturday *Financial Review,* and some of the more serious Sunday papers. There is the scope for this and although I do not know the nuts and bolts of it, I would suggest that with more journalists in the gallery and the great increase in the size of most major offices, attention can be given to doing a lot of these public policy areas, which were neglected for many years, in some depth.

I have mentioned communications reporting, which I think has been quite outstanding in recent years, and would also include subjects like transport or social welfare areas, which in the past, in terms of newsworthiness, would have been dismissed as having no audience interest. There obviously is audience interest in policy. I think there probably is still the overemphasis on politicking, but I do not know that that is ever going to change, it is deeply embedded in news media practice. We are getting a focus on policy to some degree on television, but I would like to see rather more. The current affairs programs seem to be back in the doldrums again, although the Sunday program maintains its very high quality. I would like to see more of that in electronic broadcasting, given that except for the ABC the rest of the radio in Australia is a national basket case in terms of serious content.

Question — I would like to ask you to comment on this please. If you accept the folklore of the old building and the sentimentality and nostalgia that often is referred to there, it was a very information and source-rich place for journalists to work. If you accept the folklore as it is emerging in this building, then it is a somewhat isolated, removed place where access to sources of information is not as cosy or as readily available as down in the other building. If you accept those two points, I am not quite sure that I understand why you are saying that this building is a much better place for the press and the media. If you accept that there is the reality of the distances and the isolation in this building, what then is the media doing, or what have other people done that has overcome that problem?

Professor Lloyd — I think there is a bit of a fallacy about the Old Parliament House. What I am suggesting is there was only this kind of open slather as the building got out of control in its last fifteen years. As you say, it was a superb place for journalists to operate in terms of covering politics, in terms of covering the national executive. But that was really only a transitional phase. A lot of the journalists who evoke this nostalgia, I think, were people who came there in that last period when all the rules were being broken. There was virtually no effective parliamentary oversight of what the executive was doing, what journalists were doing, what anyone else was doing. Now that may be a little unfair to the parliamentary officers, it may be a little exaggerated, but I think that was the general focus.

Of course, those with a longer experience of the old building would know that through much of its existence it was as tightly controlled as this Parliament House. Under Menzies as Prime Minister, it would be unthinkable that anyone would approach a minister in Kings Hall, or that anyone would go into his parliamentary space. Because the building was smaller, and it was much less densely populated, the general principles of Westminster parliaments prevailed, and there was a fairly tight restriction on press access. So I think it is wrong to assume that it was always the case that the old building was this hive of sources and buzz of activity, pure chaos, if you like to put it that way. I think that is a fallacy, perpetuated by those

who had their experience only in that final mad frenzy. If you look back further, control of the press in the Westminster parliaments has always been substantially the same control that is now imposed here. It was, of course, very irksome when gallery journalists, used to the relative licentiousness of the old place, came up here and found it was back to the age of austerity.