

A Stranger in Paradise? A Foreign Correspondent's View of the Parliamentary Press Gallery

Kathleen Burns

To set my job in context, let me refer to a report issued last October by the Australian parliamentary delegation to the United States, which visited there in June and July 1993. The report, *Fighting Friendly Fire*, examined media coverage — or the lack thereof — of Australian events by US journalists. It noted ‘all is not well in the Australian–US relationship’. The report concluded:

Most Americans are well-disposed toward Australia and Australians. We are seen as good blokes. We pose no threat. We are not a problem for them. On a world scale, in US eyes, the difficulties in the Australia–United States relationship pale into insignificance.

[But] on the international front, it is only the world trouble spots where the US is directly engaged that fill US television screens. It is a fact of life that the vast majority of Americans are parochial in their outlook. Local issues with obvious, direct and immediate impact dominate the media. So do oddities. It is telling that in the three weeks of the Delegation’s visit to the United States virtually the only news item on Australia carried by the major TV networks was that of a drunken koala. The fact that a koala suffered a headache as a consequence of quaffing a can of beer in a Brisbane suburb was, as far as we know, not made widely known in Australia. But it made prime time news in the United States. The plight of Australian farmers, or peacekeeping [efforts by Australians] in Cambodia failed to get a mention.

There is little understanding of the many ways in which events, policies and practices in the United States affect Australia. There seemed genuine regret that Australians might be hurt by the actions of the United States and unease that this should be so.

[But] pre-occupied and perplexed by their own domestic problems, few Americans evaluate their own Government’s policies from the wider international perspective, let alone from the point of view of a country such as Australia. It was perhaps most disappointing to find that even elite think tanks pay little attention to our part of the world and what impact United States policies have upon it.¹

1. *Fighting Friendly Fire*, Report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to the United States of America, June-July 1993, Senate Committee Office, Department of the Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, 1993, p.39.

Why is this so? Perhaps it is a combination of American ignorance and arrogance on the one hand, coupled with an Australian sense of apathy, naiveté, 'no worries' and downright frustration at being ignored on the other. I also think that sometimes Australians are their own worst enemies when it comes to generating news coverage. For whatever reasons, they can be overly modest about their own achievements. In true 'tall poppy' fashion, they beat down those who excel and thus the many exciting innovations that occur throughout Australia are not covered by Australian reporters — much less foreign reporters.

The other big problem is the redundant 'we're too small' syndrome. Lillehammer, Norway, has a total of 23,000 people in a country with only 4.3 million people, or less than one-fourth of the Australian population. Yet no-one in Lillehammer or all of Norway thought they were too small to host the 1994 Olympics, and they did a great job. They certainly got a lot of media coverage. Similarly, Israel has only 5.3 million people in a tiny sliver of land — 8,029 square miles compared to 2.97 million square miles for Australia. But the United States gives its highest amount of foreign aid annually — \$US3 billion — to Israel as well as extensive, almost daily, news coverage. Israel does not see itself as too small either.

Australians need to see themselves as a continent — not merely an island. They also need to make better use of the 20th century technology at their fingertips. Although Australia has one of the highest penetration rates in the world for computer and facsimile machine usage, I had a call from one of the major agricultural organisations that wanted to mail a press release to my editors in Washington. What an incredible waste of time! Anyone can fax a message around the world in seconds, while overseas mail takes weeks and by then the story is dead.

During the past 3 years, Australia has provided me with a wealth of wonderful topics for stories in diverse fields of business and economics, the environment, CSIRO and the sciences, trade issues and treaties, the Australian securities markets, pharmaceuticals and foods, and government regulation on all levels. On the lighter side, I even did a piece recently on 'Fabulous Facts about Australia' for the United Airline's travel magazine. I went to the White House to hear President Clinton and Prime Minister Keating discuss mutual interests. I have covered the historic visits of President Bush and Queen Elizabeth and cheered as you won the Olympic bid for the year 2000. The events have ranged from the mundane to the marvellous.

Through it all, there have been interesting and unique problems that I have encountered in trying to report on Australian news for American audiences. I must continually try to convince my Washington-based editors of the value of that news and fight for space in the paper — as with the story about the Australian Ambassador to the United States, Dr Don Russell, who spoke last week at the National Press Club about APEC, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group. My editor at the *Washington Post* played it down, saying that we had covered APEC last November and wanted to know why we were writing about it again.

I have been told by editors with the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, Knight Ridder and Scripps Howard (major American newspaper chains) that they had not heard of the export enhancement program (EEP), the US subsidy program that has had a devastating impact on Australian trade. So they asked me, 'Why should we write stories about it?' The *New York Times* stood out in that it did an outstanding series on EEP, but the others ignored it.

At the same time as fighting for stories, I must continually try to convince Australians that many of the things that happen here are indeed newsworthy and that people overseas are interested. Keep in mind that my readers are 10,000 miles away and they do not vote in Australian elections or pay Australian taxes, so some politicians here are not eager to talk to me.

One of the first clues that I was definitely a stranger in this reportorial paradise was when I noticed that people were hanging on my words; not for the content but because I had an accent. I did not know until I got here that I had an accent. Because you and I speak fluent English, I never considered myself to be in a 'foreign' land, but I gradually realised we were using words in totally different ways and that it affected my reporting. For example, when the Parliament tables a bill in Australia it means that it is published, but in the United States it means the opposite: that you kill it. So I went out and got a *Macquarie Dictionary* so I would know the Australian meaning for the words I once took for granted.

During George Bush's visit here in 1992, Americans were amazed to see an unusual story in Australian newspapers about someone lifting up their baby and asking the President if he would like to nurse the baby. In Australia that means to hold a baby in your arms, but in America it means to breastfeed — something George Bush was ill-equipped to do! Similarly, gestures can mean radically different things, generating

undesired results. In what he thought was a show of goodwill, Bush raised his hand in what would be seen in the USA as a sign of victory, but by turning his hand around toward his Australian audience — which, unfortunately, happened to be farmers — it was perceived as an obscene gesture; something of which he was unaware.

Not only were words and gestures a problem for me, but so were numbers, especially telephone numbers. When someone would mumble a phone number of double four, double three, double two, double one (44332211), I would still be writing ‘double’. And when they mixed doubles and triples, I was totally lost.

As strangers to this country and to this press gallery, we foreign correspondents also lack the helpful historical perspective. People, places and events that are commonplace to Australians are alien to us and that alters our news judgment. As a newcomer, I thought it barbarian to see ads saying, ‘Come see Phar Lap’s heart at the National Museum’, until I realised it was a horse. I had no idea why the mere mention of Dame Edna Everage made people hysterical or who Kerry Packer or Manning Clark were. Besides my confusion over language and folklore, I was also a stranger here shut out by the physical constraints of this parliament. I feel like singing that song ‘If they could see me now’.

Let me zero in on the logistics. Given the fact that there is so little media coverage in the US of Australian events, I thought Australian news makers would be greeting me with open arms when I arrived. Similarly, I thought local bureaucrats would be wining and dining me and offering assistance so that I would write about their projects. Wrong on both counts.

When I arrived in November 1990, I carried letters of introduction from my various editors which I promptly presented to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as required by your laws. Then I set off to get my credentials at the parliamentary press gallery so I could start sending the news back home.

Even though I am still the only US reporter in this gallery, it took me 9 months before the committee gave me a press box so I could collect the daily press releases that are given to everyone else. After more than 3 years, I am still waiting for them to put my name bracket on the box. In the meantime, I have scratched my name in pencil. You can look for it; I am near the bottom.

Parliamentary press releases are generally just a starting point. Thus I was amazed to see how many of my colleagues simply wrote their stories from these releases without making any phone calls. I had noticed that the same version appeared in their stories, often without change and with a by-line at the top.

Once I got a press box, I still had the hassle of getting my credentials. At first my nemesis in the parliamentary press gallery simply ignored me for weeks at a time. Then he said that he had lost my application. I said I would simply sit in his office until he found it — which he did, 15 minutes later. They finally gave me an orange pass, which is reserved for ‘lobbyists, private enterprise groups and contractors’. I was denied the standard yellow badge which is for ‘accredited members of the parliamentary press gallery’. When I protested that I did not want to be grouped with PR flacks, I was told that there was no special badge for foreign correspondents. This is unfortunate since there are several of us working here in Canberra.

Even the Foreign Correspondents Association in Sydney kept telling me that there were no foreign correspondents here, even though I pointed out that in the gallery there were reporters representing Italy, Indonesia, the UK, Germany, China, Russia and Japan. Nor will you ever see any foreign correspondents participate in the weekly ‘Meet the Press’ or other television broadcast shows. We are invisible. This is unfortunate since Australians could benefit from exposure to different points of view.

When the new parliament building opened in 1988, supposedly a room had been set aside for foreign correspondents. There was the false assumption that those in Sydney would flock to Canberra. That did not occur, so the room was locked and no other facilities have been provided. Thus we have no work space. There are not even phones next to the gallery boxes, so we have to go elsewhere to make calls to check information in the press releases.

During Warren Christopher’s visit last week, I had nowhere to go to write the seven stories I produced in two and a half days for the *Washington Post*, since there was no gallery space for foreign correspondents. Thus, in the rain, I had to shuttle back and forth several times between the Parliament and my house in Weston so I could type my stories on a laptop computer and send them back to Washington via a modem.

When time is of the essence and you are trying to make international deadlines, such roadblocks are not helpful.

Having a parliamentary press box and a pass only gets you into the building. As a foreign correspondent, I never received any introduction to how the gallery or the Parliament operated, nor were there any maps available on how to find your way around this maze. I did figure out that the carpet was colour-coded, but once you get beyond that it is really tough. Also, missing from the local paper is the daily schedule of committee hearings in the Senate and the House. In the United States the *Washington Post* publishes such relevant material so press and public alike readily know what is happening. There is no press gallery camaraderie shown to an outsider since you are seldom introduced to anyone, including the officers of the press gallery. It is difficult to operate without this professional support network.

Besides language and logistics, I have also noticed a fundamental difference in focus on what I consider news from that of some of my parliamentary press gallery colleagues. Because of its geography and physical isolation, Australia is very interested in knowing what happens overseas. An outstanding outlet for this is the ABC, with its budget of \$600 million. Thanks to Monica Attard and Ellen Fanning on 'AM' and 'PM', we know more about what is happening in Moscow, Bosnia or even Washington DC than we do about Darwin, Hobart or Perth.

The media, however, often ignore the foreign news in their midst. There are 70 embassies in Canberra but they seldom receive any news coverage unless there is a siege, as with the Iranian Embassy, or pickets outside, or a charity concert on the front lawn. Recently, the Australian–American Association organised a discussion on the shifting perspectives on Vietnam, a country which is Australia's fourth largest trading partner. Only one reporter showed up to hear what the speakers, including the Vietnamese Ambassador, had to say.

This fascination with other countries' news is fuelled, in part, by the unique foreign ownership phenomenon here. Ninety per cent of all Australian newspapers are foreign owned. These are the gatekeepers who decide what news Australians will read and their foreign ties limit the information available to you. Would any writer at one of Tony O'Reilly's Australian papers question the multinational activities of Heinz 57, which O'Reilly also owns? Could reporters at the *Australian* be totally objective in writing about Murdoch's media empire or the new stock scheme and not worry about losing their job? The same holds true for Conrad Black, who had not visited Australia prior to purchasing its two top papers — the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*. What reporter of either paper would dare do a hard-hitting story on the acquisition or the subsequent Foreign Investment Review Board inquiry and still hold his or her job?

Ironically, after trumpeting how he valued Australian editorial expertise, one of the first things Black did was to bring in an overseas editor from South Africa, a country which has no recent history of a dynamic independent press freedom because of the stifling presence of apartheid since 1948. Courageous South African journalists, like Donald Woods, fled that country long ago.

The foreign ownership in Australian newspapers combines with the high rate of media concentration in broadcasting as well as in the publishing of magazines. This situation leads to intellectual isolation. Copyright laws and postal costs make it difficult and prohibitively expensive for books and magazines to come into the country and to offer Australians a broad gamut of news sources.

Thus, Australian journalists cover the routine domestic news: unemployment, taxes, health, local government services, schools and daily trivia. But for those in the press gallery, the focus is politics — and it is an obsession. The problem is being located in this building and wrongly believing that this is where most of the news that interests the average person comes from. Reporters in this building are shielded from the realities of pounding the beat and looking for news in the real world.

Because of a fixation on political news, many other worthwhile stories never get covered. This was particularly true during the 3 months of the 'Sports Rorts' media trial of Ros Kelly. Few journalists picked up the story that the environment minister joined her cabinet colleagues in giving a 4-year extension to the dumping of a very toxic chemical called jarosite off the waters of Tasmania. The press gallery similarly ignored plans to boost meat inspection fees by 50 per cent until the Opposition and the Australian Democrats combined efforts and forced Labor to back down.

The Prime Minister, Paul Keating, seriously misread the situation when he said on February 25 that except for the press gallery, no-one in Australia was interested in this internal friction. But 3 days later, Kelly was forced to resign. Both the Prime Minister and some of the media missed the message sent by the public during an outbreak at question time. This was not a 'gender issue', since Mrs Kelly was 'one of the boys'; this was not a sports issue, since the grants could have been tied to anything. The bottom line was money and taxpayers wanted to know where it was going. One reporter who got it right was Margo Kingston of the *Canberra Times*.

Another reason for the obsession with political news is the concept of the Westminster system, where all power is vested in the Prime Minister. If you are a member of the party in power, you must vote according to party lines, unless it is an extraordinary matter of conscience. By the time something comes up for action, politicians know what the outcome will be. In comparison with the United States, power in our government is balanced between the President, as executive, and the House and Senate, as the legislative body, with each having veto powers over the other. As the recent Reagan and Bush administrations would attest, there are often many Democrats and Republicans voting against their own parties, since congressional members enjoy a degree of autonomy and individual notoriety which is unheard of in Australia. The Supreme Court also plays a more active role in striking down or upholding legislation in executive orders.

Since our election terms are fixed by law, reporters in the United States do not continually wonder how long a government's term will last, though President Clinton may be disputing this based on current Whitewater coverage. This is not so in Australia, where I would also question the ethics of polling techniques and the way that they are reported. Often, pollsters or reporters leave out how many people were questioned, how they were selected, the demographics of the group, who paid for the poll, and how the poll was conducted. What is most disturbing is that surveys have a built-in margin of error of between 5 per cent and 10 per cent, so some of these so-called swings would be insignificant. The *Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, on American journalistic guidelines, states:

Only when the margin between the candidates is more than twice the sampling error can one candidate be said to be leading. If the gap is less than the error margin, the poll says the candidates are about even.

In the Australian Parliament, there is seldom any real debate, except in the Senate where members of the Greens and the Australian Democrats may occasionally combine with the Opposition, but it is unusual for all three to agree and to have the numbers to carry the vote. I see that Mr Keating is getting ready to work on the Senate, so that may not occur anymore there either.

Lacking substantive debate on the issues, the press gallery is forced to focus more on the process than the outcome; on the personalities rather than the underlying issues. Thus question time becomes a major source of news. Yet, to the average Australian, it provides little real value; instead of debate there is diatribe. It is a national embarrassment rather than an enlightening experience. There is no pretence at civility, with interchanges resembling 'Fast Forward' skits. I have heard teachers say that they no longer take their students to observe the antics of these adults. Amidst the verbal gladiators, this is not government at its best.

Another tough situation for the press gallery reporters is the fact that the party out of power is basically powerless. These politicians can say whatever they want, but generally their votes hold no weight. There is no thoughtful, consistent plan on being the Opposition. On the 'Mabo' issue, the Opposition, instead of generating a serious debate for the public good, simply folded up and opted out of the final draft. The Opposition squanders its efforts on telling us what it may do some day if it ever wins office, and since the Opposition cannot radically affect most legislation the press focuses on the internal squabbles with a rabid fascination. In reality, does it make any difference who is head of the party out of power if the Westminster system denies them any productive way to exercise that voice?

A third situation that the press gallery has to deal with is the role of ministers under this Westminster scheme. They are like a deck of cards that is routinely shuffled. Since 1983 there have been nine ministers for communications and eight for the arts. As journalists, it would be more helpful to focus on the department itself and the bureaucrats who are in charge of day-to-day activities, rather than the changing figureheads at the top. Why is it that editors do not use a beat system so that someone covers these

powerful departments on a regular basis? Editors should also tell the reporters to follow the money, not the minister.

A fourth and most difficult situation that my press gallery colleagues must contend with is the media laws which make being a journalist in Australia an almost impossible task. Indeed, it seems the only people to enjoy truly free speech are parliamentarians speaking in parliament. As a result, there is little hard-hitting investigative reporting since reporters are far too vulnerable. This is in stark contrast to the reporting freedom I enjoyed in the United States under the benefits of the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees a free press and free speech for all. Australia lacks a unified federal media law. Instead, each state has widely varying norms, none of which are hospitable to journalists.

In Australia there are no shield laws that provide for informants to reveal confidential material to journalists without the threat of such reporters being prosecuted for refusing to disclose their sources. In fact, in some Australian states even priests in the confessional enjoy no shield law protection. In the United States, 28 individual states have protective shield laws. They offer qualified rather than absolute privilege for reporters.² It does not always protect journalists from being subpoenaed and cited by judges for contempt for refusing to divulge information, but it does provide a great deal more protection than would be available in Australia.

In 1732, long before we were the United States of America, the colonies decided that truth was a defence in libel matters in the precedent-setting case of John Peter Zenger, a German printer. That basic right still does not apply in Australia. Privilege is also woefully lacking, especially for 'fair comment'. If I criticise an art exhibit or a mediocre restaurant, I can be sued. The definition of privacy in Australia is also radically different from that in the United States and sharply inhibits solid reporting. Nor can one easily follow the paper trail that is a basic investigative tool in the United States, since many routine licences and documents here are not open to the same public scrutiny. The Freedom of Information Act is weak and a pay-in-advance proposition with little guarantee of obtaining any useful data.

Crispin Hull, a tough-minded reporter for the *Canberra Times*, sums it up best when he notes that Australia's convict past means that those at the top take sides with authority, and one is not encouraged to question the system; thus reporting can be a veritable minefield. Hull said:

The nature of what is defamatory in Australia is very wide, more so than in the UK. It allows all sorts of things which most people regard as trivial . . . There's no mercy here if you get something wrong. The onus is on the person making a comment to prove it's true.

Besides the impossibilities of media law in Australia, there is also no journalistic support system like there is in the United States with groups such as the Society of Professional Journalists, with 25,000 members, providing a lot of assistance. In Australia the Australian Journalists Association deals only with union issues such as salaries and working conditions; not ethical matters.

If the powerful parliamentary press gallery and the National Press Club joined forces, they could demand changes to bring Australian media laws into the 20th century. They should be joined in this effort by all the communications departments of the major universities in Australia. All three groups need to push for better professional training as well as mid-career updating of skills.

I am amazed that at the university level practical professional journalistic experience among faculty members is viewed with absolute disdain. Yet all theory without solid hands-on work experience through supervised internships and lots of practical classroom exercises is a waste of time and the degree merely a sheet of worthless paper. One 10-page term paper a semester does nothing to teach one the rigours of writing under deadlines or producing spot news. How great it would be if every working journalist in this press gallery took on a student for 14 weeks each semester. Both would benefit from the exchange of skills and instruction.

I had an interesting experience yesterday when I was teaching a class of 32 students in two sections. Not one of those 32 students could tell me what a part of speech was. When I asked, 'How about nouns and

² The Quill magazine, Society of Professional Journalists, October 1991, p.15

verbs? Do they mean anything to you?', they looked at me as if to say 'She speaks with forked tongue.' Being daring, I moved on to homonyms and it was as though they were asking, 'Where did they find this woman!' No wonder we do not have time to teach ethics if we do not know what a noun and a verb is. I can hardly wait to read the papers this semester; it should be a real challenge.

Besides the logistical nightmares, foreign correspondents here face problems inherent in covering a totally different political system. Reporting the Australian Parliament is vastly different from reporting the US Congress, which I observed both from the outside as a journalist and from the inside as an investigator with the House of Representatives for three years.

Perhaps a good example of the differences in perception between myself and members of the Australian press gallery came most sharply into focus in December 1991. Prime Minister Bob Hawke's tenure was on shaky ground. The press was not merely reporting what was happening, but seemed actively involved as catalysts for the events. To me, they seemed to have crossed the line which calls for neutral, objective, non-partisan reporting based on what has been observed. Only those writing editorials, letters to the editor or drawing political cartoons should state how they think and feel about such matters — not the reporters.

On December 19, Hawke was toppled from power and Paul Keating became the Prime Minister. Since I was one of the few foreign correspondents observing this event, I was interviewed by Tony Delroy of the ABC regarding my observation. To me, it was extraordinary that a country of 17 million people was now headed by a man who had won by only seven votes in a limited party caucus. Unlike the American system, there was no direct election by the people. This seemed most unusual to me.

The upheaval in the Australian Labor Party came only 10 days before the visit of US President George Bush, who also happened to be a personal friend and golfing buddy of Hawke. The *Washington Post* had asked me to do a personality profile on the new Prime Minister for its style section. I was delighted. But I got no cooperation from Keating's neophyte press staff. The very limited biography sheet they gave me provided no details, no insights and no interest.

I tried to explain to Keating's media person that the head of one of the most powerful countries in the world was coming to visit and that the people in the United States wanted to know more about this new and generally unknown Australian leader. She curtly reminded me that Keating was once described as 'the world's greatest Treasurer'. 'Oh!' I said, 'That's very interesting, but it's not much to write about now.'

Since the American public had no idea of what Keating looked like, I wanted a photo. And because the new Prime Minister had a young, attractive family, and he was still with his wife — which is a plus in American politics — I requested a photo of the family as well. Again, they said to me that there would be no photos and that the earliest they could provide any information or background data would be in 3 weeks — long after Bush had departed.

So I did not get the story. But more importantly the American public did not get the story either and Keating received very little overseas coverage. In fact, when Bush and Keating visited the new Maritime Museum in Sydney that week, Bush was photographed by *Newsweek Magazine* peering into a submarine periscope. The person next to him was left unidentified in the photo and unmentioned in the story copy. It was Paul Keating.

Two years later, the message still had not sunk in that if you want to appear in American media you have to work at it. Prior to his departure for the United States, I mentioned to Keating's media staff in September some things that might be helpful in generating coverage. It was a PR person's dream, since it was 10 days before the 2000 Olympics decision was announced — and Sydney was definitely a frontrunner. But the Keating team ignored it. Americans love schmaltz. I said, 'Give Clinton a baseball cap with a Sydney logo, a pin for Hillary, a T-shirt for Chelsea. Run that Olympic flag up the pole of your embassy, which is only a block from the *Washington Post*, and a photo is more than likely. Make use of Anita Keating's fluency in languages and have her address reporters at the Foreign Press Centre. Then, have her serve morning tea at the embassy residence with some of Australia's leading designers who have shops in the Washington area so you can show the media what new wool really looks like. Go out of your way to meet the American media beforehand and invite them for snacks of emu and kangaroo such as Qantas is featuring on its flights.' Nothing happened. The visit went unnoticed and unreported. The final blow — which was not Keating's fault — was the cancellation of the National Press Club luncheon where he had planned to lay out his point of view. It went to Yasser Arafat, instead.

In the good news column, Ambassador Don Russell emphasised on March 9 in his National Press Club address that one of his goals was to work on better press coverage — an area ignored by his predecessor who, in 3 years, gave few interviews and press conferences. He said, ‘I have been willing to appear on almost any American radio program that will have me’, adding that he is doing his own version of ‘Meet the Press’, with a full agenda of interviews. I hope that the first person he calls to set up one of those interviews when he returns to Washington is my boss.

Questioner — Thank you very much for that speech. I learnt a lot about the media in my own country. Something I would like to follow up, is the objectivity aspect. When there was coverage on our television of the presidential elections, I was fascinated by the way the interviewers would elicit the information from the interviewee and allow me, in my lounge room, to make up my own mind without, as is my experience in Australia, having the interviewer overlay the questions with a presumption or an assumption. Why is there a difference — unless I am generalising — in the American media and Australian media approach?

Ms Burns — With the political coverage, I think sometimes we are obsessed with the personal aspects. We want to know if there are any skeletons in the family’s closet. I do not think they get into that as much in Australia. Because we can get a lot more paper information, we can check out whether you really did have a degree, and certain financial statements must be provided — I understand that yesterday the Parliament discussed such requirements of parliamentarians.

One of the things I noticed here is the different questioning techniques. Even the ABC, which I regard highly, asks browbeating questions. Reporters will ask somebody, ‘Don’t you think . . .’ I tell students not to do that because you are setting a person up. Reporters also do not give them the chance to respond. They ask them a question and keep interrupting so that there is never a chance to give a formal response. This is very widespread. It kills me when I see it happening on the ABC because it is, in so many ways, a superior news system. But they browbeat people sometimes with the questions and there are a couple of people who do it all the time.

Questioner — As a fellow visitor who is also confused by double and triple phone numbers, I am in sympathy with some of the things you said, particularly about libel laws and about the ethics of how polls are reported. But there are some other things that confused me a bit.

Ms Burns — Are you a reporter here?

Questioner — Not any more. I was, in America, for a time. There is the idea that it is something distinctive about Australia that foreign correspondents are not on the commentary shows like ‘Meet the Press’. I cannot think of the last time I saw a foreign correspondent on America’s ‘Meet the Press’ or ‘This Week’ with David Brinkley.

Ms Burns — I mean ever. For example, would it have been helpful last week to have had a Japanese journalist talk about their view of super 301 trade sanctions, just to get a different point of view once in a while?

Questioner — Okay. Or the idea that the reporters in Parliament House are excessively focused on political news in Parliament House. Is that different from how correspondents act in any legislative house — federal or state?

Ms Burns — I think we would cover bill action in much greater detail than they do here. It is much harder to find out. I could probably get a copy of *Hansard*, but because of the tremendous expense, it did not seem financially worth my while to buy and then have to store it. It is much harder to follow a bill. Also, I think they do not cover the role of lobbyists here in as great detail, although lobbyists, as we all know, in every country of the world are the ones who decide what gets to be law. I do not think there is the same kind of coverage here to enable people to know who initiated the bill and why it went this way or that. Because there is not much debate on a bill, you do not see much being amended and there is no public participation. There are not a lot of public hearings on bills — or there might be, and I just have not been able to find out about them.

Questioner — I am interested in your views. I spent 1990 in Washington DC at the time of the Australian federal election and your newspaper the *Washington Post* had, at best, a 700-word article on the winner of

the election. That was the limit of the Washington press coverage of the Australian federal election. I am interested in your views on that. When I complained to the ombudsman of the *Washington Post*, he sent me back a rather curt response and said, 'Well, you know, *Washington Post* has to cover 157 different countries. How can we afford to send people everywhere?' That was not really my intention. I was merely trying to raise the issue with him that Australia is, theoretically, one of America's closest allies. At least in America there should be a little bit more than 700-word articles from a string of biased angles.

Ms Burns — I do not know about the 1990 election, but they sent in Bill Branigan from the Philippines for the 1993 election. They considered it such an important story that they got the bureau chief for the whole Asia-Pacific region to come in and do it. While he was here he also did an extensive piece on Mabo. I think he did about five or six in-depth stories.

Christopher's visit last week is probably more current. It was very frustrating because of the limited amount of coverage. There was a parallel between Christopher's visit and Bush's visit in the sense that Australia was viewed as a pit stop on the way to some place really important. Many of the stories that appeared in the American press — and I have not seen a lot of the clips — do not even have an Australian date line and they only talked about Japan and China. There was very little acknowledgment of what was happening here.

I felt like I had a split personality because I am American and I am a reporter. There were 17 American reporters covering anything from the Australian point of view. They talked about the export enhancement program and Christopher said, 'Oh, well, we really haven't done much with that in the last several months.' Ten days after Clinton and Keating met, there was a massive EEP sale and Christopher said, 'Well, that wouldn't occur again because of GATT.' There have been 43 more sales since GATT was signed in December.

Also, there was the whole problem that the American media — not including me — did not recognise that the super 301 problem with Japan was putting Australia in the middle between the United States and Japan, both Australian allies. None of the stories mentioned the fact that Japan is Australia's largest trading partner, not the United States; that Australia has a huge trade surplus with Japan and a big trade deficit with the United States. Some of the coverage was extremely one-sided.

During the press conference on the second night, we had two questions on Australia before they started asking Christopher about Whitewater. Here is somebody who is 10,000 miles out of the country and not intimately involved with that issue anyhow. I thought that the American press froze out some of the Australian reporters.

Every time I have been back home, I have always looked to see if there is something about Australia and a lot of the time the only thing I could find was the weather. You can guarantee if anybody in Australia is eaten by a shark, bitten by a snake or nibbled by a crocodile that it will be international news. There was a wonderful project in Melbourne where they found out how to recycle rubber tyres. Nobody has known what to do with them. They built a \$9 million plant, and it has been so successful that they have created eight subsidiary businesses. I have never seen any coverage of something like that. Of all the stuff the CSIRO does, very little of it makes the American media. It is very frustrating. As I said, part of it is the Australian attitude because they have not actively gone out of their way to promote the country. I think sometimes when they do go out of their way, they do not get any response and they give up.

I also write for a company called BNA. Most people are not familiar with BNA, but BNA has 80 publications and has the largest number of reporters in the press gallery. It is the second largest news agency in Washington, next to the *Washington Post*. I said to the Australia press secretary, 'Would you like to see a print-out of the articles I did on Australia, because there are about 250 of them and it would give you a good idea of what we are saying?' He said to me, 'Why would I even care?' I thought that was an interesting approach.

Then I asked for some help. I do not travel much with my job because of the cost, and I wanted to get some help on some things about Perth. He said that he was much too busy to do anything about that. So when I went back for Keating's visit in September I saw this person again and asked for some more information, and they sent me on a wild goose chase to get my press pass. I had to wait over at the State Department for two hours, only to find out that it was not the right kind of press pass anyhow.

It works both ways. I am not here to provide any answers. Somebody asked me, 'What can Australia do to get great press coverage?' I kiddingly said, 'Well, there are two things: One, ask for money because the US always covers people who receive American aid, and two, get a nuclear weapon. You would only need one, but we would keep attention focused very directly.' You could probably use the money that we give you to buy the nuclear weapon, which would help our balance of trade enormously.

Questioner — Thank you very much for your lecture; I got a different viewpoint. When the Israeli and PLO foreign ministers met on the White House lawn, Paul Keating had a chance to gain a higher profile but he stood in the background. How was that viewed in Washington? Do you think it is just that our current Prime Minister wants to take a different profile, in the sense that he does not want to trip over TV cables?

Ms Burns — I watched the Israeli declaration on television because access was limited. That would not have been an appropriate time for Paul Keating to say, 'Let me say a few words about Australia.' I think it was unfortunate that Australian officials favoured only the 30 Australians travelling with Mr Keating. They were going to write about it anyhow. The Australian Government did not make any effort; none of my friends in the American media knew he was coming or knew anything about it. When he held the press conference, they did not put anything out on the wires. They did not have an informal meeting with him, one on one.

I think Mrs Keating would have been a terrific plus for Australia. She is a very intelligent and attractive woman, and they made no use of her. Don Russell realises that this is a problem, and he intends to do something about it. I think he is an extremely articulate person, and it is probably one of Mr Keating's better appointments in the sense that he is somebody who understands trade.

I found it very frustrating when Warren Christopher said that Australia is our oldest and most trusted ally, and we immediately cut to World War II. Fifty years later, it is not relevant to say that we fought shoulder to shoulder in every war — except the one that counts, the trade war. I think that is the problem. They made a big deal about defence. Defence in the Pacific is not a real problem. You are safer on a ship in the Pacific than you are in almost any major city in the United States because of the lack of gun control. It is said how wonderful it was that we came out here to defend the Pacific. It was wonderful 50 years ago, but the talks last week focused inordinately on the military aspect. If you come up with any good stories, call me.

Questioner — I have been in Washington for the past 9 months and I watched the press very carefully. Everyday I read the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, *US Today* and various others. I was watching for mention of Australia, and it did not surface at all; there was an article or two on Thomas Keneally. The only by-line that got continuous attention — and I mean continuous — in a number of periodicals and on a number of up-to-date issues about Australia was that of Kathleen Burns.