



SUBMISSION BY THE

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' ASSOCIATION
(AUSTRALIA & SOUTH PACIFIC)

TO THE

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE & TRADE

INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND CONDUCT OF
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN AUSTRALIA

9 April 2007

Dear Committee Members,

I would like to thank the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for inviting the Foreign Correspondents' Association to make a submission and to participate in this important inquiry into the current effectiveness of public diplomacy programs and practices by the Australian Government.

We believe the members of the FCA play a crucial part in the process of forming Australia's image overseas. In contrast to many overseas journalists who only travel to Australia on a short-term assignment to do one or two stories, our members are based here, often for many years. They observe and report on all aspects of Australian life, be it business, culture and, of course, politics. There is no other comparable organisation in Australia whose members are indirectly involved so intensely and authoritatively in shaping Australia's image overseas.

The Foreign Correspondents' Association Australia & South Pacific (FCA) represents journalists from around the globe. The organisation was formally established in 1985 to promote the professional interests of correspondents from overseas news organizations based in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. We have a membership of approximately 130, which consists of 115 foreign correspondents and journalists, mostly based in Sydney and Canberra, and associate members such as diplomats from a variety of countries, as well as representatives of companies, government departments and public relations firms.

Our correspondent members cover news and current affairs stories and produce features for media in well over 50 countries of Europe, Asia, the Americas and the South Pacific. They work for all forms of media: print, radio, television and internet. The range of media organisations our members represent is as extensive as it is diverse: we have members working for *People's Daily*, China's largest newspaper, we have all major Japanese news agencies represented as well as major international publications such as the UK's *Financial Times* and the German *Handelsblatt*.

The combined audience of our members is in the billions.

While some members are in Australia as representatives of their media organization on a temporary basis, many others work on a freelance or part-time basis for a range of publications. Many live here permanently and some have taken up Australian citizenship.

All correspondent members work independently, according to the rules, regulations and ethical standards of their respective media organisations. The FCA has no influence whatsoever on what is written and where it is published.

The core purpose of the FCA's existence is to create opportunities for our members for researching stories, be it via organizing events such as speeches by prominent people or organizing trips. The FCA is constantly working with sponsor organizations and companies that have an interest in exposure in the countries our members represent.

Fact-finding trips have proven to be extremely valuable both for FCA members and hosts, which can include Federal and State Government Departments. All hosts are fully aware that members

are strictly independent. They are professional journalists and cannot be seen as an extension of a company's or government department's public relations, or public diplomacy arm.

Many hosts invite us on a continuing basis, as quality journalistic exposure in international media by far outweighs the cost of hosting the trip and is significantly more effective than placing an advertisement. Many organisations have realized that thanks to the FCA it is not necessary to invite journalists from overseas, which necessitates expensive international airfares. Some of the organisations that organise and invite FCA members on trips are Invest Victoria, Northern Territory Tourism, Tourism Victoria, and, most recently, a range of mining companies.

The FCA is funded solely by membership fees and sponsorship contributions. Sponsorship of the FCA can take various forms, including banners and links on our website www.foreigncorrespondents.org. The FCA website is the first access point for many journalists from all over the world, who are looking for information about Australia, prior to a possible visit. Sponsors with links on our home page, directing visitors to their own websites, benefit noticeably from the link with the FCA. We have in the last few years been able to attract some excellent sponsors, most notably the New South Wales Department of State and Regional Development.

Recently we were able to negotiate a substantial agreement with a major communications company that will sponsor a series of luncheons and other events where the FCA will host some high profile speakers at FCA Newsmaker Luncheons. I am also very happy to inform you that we now have an agreement with a very important Australian Government organisation. Tourism Australia (TA) will not only be sponsoring our website, they will use our membership base as a resource for their extensive media visits program. Our correspondent members will be able to go on TA-sponsored trips to Australian tourism destinations and report on Australian tourism product for their media outlets.

This brings me to the role of the FCA in "public diplomacy", or as we journalists might call it, "public relations" for Australia.

Unfortunately, Australian Government entities other than TA have yet to discover what opportunities the FCA can offer. The only contact we have had in the past few years was with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Most years that Department is kind enough to sponsor an annual visit to Canberra for a group of members so they can observe the delivery of the budget. Usually included in these trips are briefing sessions with Ministers – usually Foreign Affairs and Trade - and senior public officials. In Sydney we also had a few background briefing sessions by senior government representatives, such as the former Australian representative to the Solomon Islands. A highlight for many members was a briefing by the Foreign Minister Alexander Downer MP in Sydney last year. On another occasion, the DFAT office in Sydney invited a group of FCA members on a visit to South Australia. It included several business briefings and a call to Mr. Downer's Mt. Barker office. Such visits are of great value for our members and result in significant exposure in international newspapers and other media.

Sadly, Ms Deborah George, former Manager of the DFAT international media office in Sydney and the initiator of the SA trip, passed away at the end of last year. But we are confident that DFAT, under the guidance of Dr. Lachlan Strahan, Assistant Secretary Images of Australia Branch, and Mr. Warwick Chuck, Manager of the International Media Centre in Sydney run by DFAT, will continue this very effective way of communicating Australian business and political messages to a global audience. The FCA has recently indicated to DFAT our desire not only to widen beyond DFAT the list of potential interview partners - such as Ministers and senior public

servants - but also to visit projects such as the North West Shelf oil and gas fields, with the assistance of the Australian Government.

Apart from these possibilities, it is the FCA's view that the Australian Government not only *could* but also *should* use the FCA much more to communicate messages to the world. It is very clear that our members significantly shape the image the world has of Australia. We believe the Australian Government has not yet realized this and is underestimating or not recognizing at all the impact our members' work has.

After 15 years working as a senior South Pacific correspondent for some of the major newspapers and electronic media in Europe, I have come to the view that many parts of the Australian Government seem to lack commitment to overseas media and to overseas audiences. One can only speculate about the reasons. However, one experience I had in 2002 sums them up quite well. After an interview I had with the Prime Minister in his office in Parliament House, Mr Howard accepted our invitation for him to speak before the FCA. Subsequent calls to his office to set a date and organize this event proved futile. In the end, after many phone calls over many months, I was told by a senior member of his media staff in no uncertain terms that "there are simply no votes in him [Mr Howard] speaking to foreign journalists".

This, of course, is ill informed. Anyone in charge of public relations of a government should know that in today's world of instant communication, anything that happens here would be reported to the whole world in seconds. And in an instant this information is back on the screens of Australian news desks. Many of the stories that are written by FCA members and published in overseas media filter back into Australia and are then taken up by domestic media.

But this "domestic factor" should not be the main reason why the Australian government should be very interested in working very closely with foreign media, be it in their overseas posts or be it here, with the FCA and with visiting journalists. Australia is a country dependent on exporting not only goods and services but – for the purpose of attracting tourists - also an image, a lifestyle, indeed a whole way of life. While I believe that Tourism Australia (TA) are doing a good job in portraying Australia as a country tourists should want to come and visit, their reach is obviously limited.

It is foreign news agencies and journalists that predominantly shape the views overseas audiences form of Australia. It is they who report on the reality of life, politics and business – unhindered by the constraints of being public servants or being otherwise dependent on the government. It should therefore be in the interest of the Australian government to facilitate their work as much as possible – not for the purpose of influencing them, but because ease of access to the government and its representatives can offer Canberra the opportunity to put their point of view to foreign audiences via a way that lends the message credibility. Information coming from the Australian Government – for example in an interview with a Minister - that is reviewed and analysed by an independent foreign correspondent and subsequently distributed in a professionally-written story, has far more credibility than a press release sent out by a PR diplomat at an overseas post.

However, to accommodate the needs of foreign correspondents better does not mean that they necessarily will write more favourable stories. Most professional journalists will see through spin quickly and expose it for what it is. But particularly in situations where Australia's image and reputation are in danger of being severely and permanently damaged on a global scale, it should be in the interests of the Government to put its position not only to domestic but even more importantly to international media.

One such case was the Tampa affair in 2001. From an image point of view I personally see this event as a turning point in Australia's history. It was the time when the country lost a significant part of the very favourable image it had built up before and during the 2000 Olympic Games. Other subsequent political issues, that in my view and in the view of other foreign correspondents had a negative impact on Australia's image overseas, were the Children Overboard affair, Woomera/Baxter detention centres, the relationship with the United States of America, the participation in the Iraq war, AWB, the treatment of David Hicks – just to name a few.

In all these cases, the government would have been well-advised to put as much effort into accommodating the information needs of foreign media as it did with domestic journalists. This will become an even more pressing need for the government in the future, if Australia decides to continue its separate path regarding the fight against climate change and other issues of global importance.

The FCA has isolated the following issues we believe are integral to the Australian Government's public diplomacy outcomes and Australia's international image:

1. Create awareness of foreign media throughout the Australian Government

We recommend that the Senate Standing Committee urge all Ministerial colleagues to have their own and departmental media relations staff briefed about the role and influence of foreign media based in Australia. The FCA is happy to work on creating a relevant information program that can then be presented by the FCA to the media/public diplomacy staff of Ministers' offices and Departments.

2. Re-establish the International Media Centre in Sydney

We recommend that the Senate Standing Committee urge Ministerial colleagues to establish a new International Media Centre (IMC) in Sydney to cater for the needs of visiting overseas journalists and resident foreign correspondents, while providing a gateway for all Australian government instrumentalities to communicate with the world. Australia must be one of only a few Western countries that do not have a well-equipped and functioning Media Centre for foreign correspondents and visiting journalists. The IMC that was set-up in 1995 in Margaret Street, Sydney, was not large by Olympic standards, but it had the capacity to welcome and provide facilities for visiting media, including up to 10 computers with internet and workstations, optic fibre links for television feeds around the world, an excellent radio studio, interview rooms and also a large room for the FCA's briefings and Newsmaker Luncheons, where important Australian Government Ministers and foreign dignitaries addressed up to 80 foreign correspondents and dozens of domestic media at a time during 1996. Since just after the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the IMC in Margaret Street, ceased to exist. A small office called the IMC is now located as part of DFAT Sydney in the Angel Place building and is open only when it is manned by a single staff member who has many out of house duties, such as accompanying visiting overseas journalists.

The Australian Government could benefit widely by establishing a fully equipped International Media Centre in Sydney, such as existed in Margaret Street. Financial stakeholders would ideally be from the 20 or so Australian Government Departments and agencies that constitute the Interdepartmental Committee on public diplomacy, to ensure that Australia's whole-of-government interests were represented.

We propose that the FCA set up and manage the new International Media Centre on a contractual basis and the FCA's headquarters be based in the IMC. We would provide not only the day-to-day management of the centre, but also a regular channel for communications with all stakeholder government departments and agencies. For example, if any government departmental or agency media officers were seeking advice or ideas on ways to get their messages through to particular countries, we would be able to advise and organise. It would be the place that visiting foreign journalists and FCA members would meet for interviews, research and writing stories. At the same time it would be the venue for the FCA's Newsmaker Luncheons and provide briefing facilities for Government Ministers.

3. Organize regular meetings with Government Ministers of all Departments

We recommend that the Senate Standing Committee urge Ministers of all Government portfolios to give priority to invitations to speak before the FCA at Newsmaker Luncheons, as well as at briefings when requested by the FCA.

4. Expand Government Visits Programs for FCA members

We recommend that the Senate Committee urge Ministerial colleagues to encourage their Departments to develop direct lines of communication with the FCA, so that visits to places and projects of interest to FCA members can be facilitated.

In summary, the FCA believes that much can be done to encourage visitors and investment in Australia and a better understanding and appreciation of Australia around the world, if the wider Australian Government becomes actively involved with the FCA membership, through the speedy establishment of a new IMC and direct Ministerial/Departmental engagement with the FCA, which includes assistance with visits within Australia.

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