

Opposition and the media

Paul Malone

The Opposition isn't really the opposition.... They're just the government in exile.

The media, are the opposition

With apologies to Sir Humphrey, who thought -- wrongly -- that the Civil Service was the Opposition, you can mount a strong argument that the real opposition the government faces is the media.

Sometime, of course, being *The Opposition*, the media goes too far. Some years back, when Paul Keating was Treasurer, and new everything about everything, he lectured the public on architecture and housing. The *Canberra Times*, in its role as Opposition, ran front page photos of Keating's houses. It published the street address of all the houses, including the house Keating's family lived in, in Canberra.

Keating, quite understandably was furious.

From here the legendary story goes as follows: Keating rang the paper and asked for the editor. Crispin Hull was not yet in. So he asked for the Deputy Editor, Jack Waterford. It was only 9.30. He wasn't in either. So he asked for who-ever was in charge of the news room and was put through to Graham Downie.

"I'm ringing about those photos on the front page of the paper", Keating said.

"What photos?"

"The photos on the front of your paper -- the houses!"

"I'm sorry Mr Keating I

"Are you in charge?"

Yes.

You haven't seen the photos on the front page of your own paper?"

No.

What sort of a fucking moron are you? Why haven't you seen the photos on the front page of your own paper?"

After a pause

".....I'm blind!"

Now sometimes the Government goes too far too.

The official opposition – the responsible opposition -- is dependent on the media if it is to have any chance of over-throwing the government. Despite the advent of new ways of directly communicating with the public, through email and the internet, and direct mail and advertising, the media is still one of the best ways of communicating with the mass of people and generating the hysteria about an issue that is usually required to cause a government to lose office.

The Opposition needs the media to get issues on the public agenda.

The Opposition can try as it might, but unless the media takes up an issue, it will not be able to significantly wound the Government

On the other hand, many media outlets have the power to wound the Government.

Ellen Fanning well illustrated this in her brilliant series on the media broadcast on SBS.

During the NSW election campaign in 2003, and at the height of world protests against the invasion of Iraq, the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* decided to take up the issue of drug dealing in Cabramatta. The NSW government had claimed to have tackled the issue and had put more police on the beat in Cabramatta.

The *Telegraph* ignored the issues the Government and Opposition were seeking to promote and sent a team headed by their then state political reporter to see if the people on the ground had noticed a difference. The team found that 11 of the 19 people interviewed had noticed an improvement.

But that wasn't going to put off the Tele.

When they splashed their story -- on the same day as they reported the biggest demonstration in Sydney's history -- they ran the line:

"Drug criminals have stepped up their heroin dealing in broad daylight on Cabramatta's streets—despite pre election boasts from the Carr Government that police are winning the war on drugs there."

The story provoked immediate follow-up from numerous other media outlets and, of course, the Opposition. It also forced the Premier and minister to defend their actions on this most complex problem

As Bob McMullan has recently pointed out, the incumbents have enormous advantages over the challengers. The Prime Minister gets to make the decisions and the announcements that matter. He gets to choose when the election will be called. He can use taxpayers money to mount political advertising, increase MPs postage and printing allowances etc.

The Leader of the Opposition finds it hard to get publicity and the media is bored with policy announcements. The best Opposition media story is, of course, *The leadership challenge*. That is why, if one isn't happening, someone in the media will want to make it up. I well remember when Bill Hayden was leader of the Opposition and Anne Summers was the *Australian Financial Review's* relatively new political correspondent she got the

strong suggestion (direction) from then editor Max Walsh to write that Neville Wran was going to make a move on Canberra.

The media can make, or more easily break, a leader of the Opposition. Just ask John Brogden.

Since December 1972 we have had 12 different Federal Leaders of the Opposition – and that's not counting the fact that three of these had two goes at it.

In that time we've only had 5 different Prime Ministers.

The count of 12 different Federal Leaders of the Opposition also is an understatement of the political tension because it ignores the failed challenges to the leadership in that time. Billy Snedden was challenged, twice by Fraser, with Fraser losing at his first attempt but winning in March 75.

Hayden was challenged twice by Hawke.

And Keating challenged Hawke twice.

The liberals really showed how musical chairs could be played and the media kept entertained.

Peacock was leader from 1983 to 85.

The Howard was leader from 85 to 89..

Then Hewson had a go from 90 to 94

Then Downer had a go in 94-95

And finally Howard rose again in 95

Labor has done its best to match this

Beazley was in in 1996 to 2001

Then Crean had a go from 2001 to 2003

Latham had a crack from 2003 to 2005, managing at least to set some of the agenda

And now we're back to Beazley

The media has obligingly helped in all these challenges..... And sometimes, even helps when a challenge isn't even on.

There's nothing like a challenge story when it's a quiet day and a political columnist has just got to find SOMETHING to write about.

In response to the specific questions I was asked to address:

Leadership

Who in your experience stand out as effective Opposition Leaders, and what explains their effectiveness?

John Howard, came back successfully, tenacious

Whitlam 1 – dominant, presentable, impressive, intellectual, open to ideas, looked up to, in more ways than one

*Hawke, but only because he was opposition leader for a very short time.
He would have been ground away if he had had to endure a long stint.*

Who stand out as ineffective Opposition leaders, and what explains their lack of effectiveness?

Too many to choose from

Downer, Hewson, Latham, (not at first – at first possibly a breath of fresh air, but those who saw his personal flaws were right)

Evatt, Calwell (three time losers)

Do you think that effective Opposition parties make effective party leaders or do effective party leaders make effective Opposition parties?

You have to be an effective party leader to be an effective opposition leader. The parties are too disorganized or torn with divisions to make leaders. Leaders emerge through them, or survive, in spite of the party.

In what ways do smaller opposition parties help or hinder the task of Official Oppositions?

*Smaller opposition parties can be populist, knowing they never have to deliver. They can grab the committed from the major parties (although in our preferential system, some of this will come back to the major parties)
The press and media*

Many commentators think that Oppositions simply ride the wave of press and media criticism of governing parties: to what extent does the press and media set the agenda for Oppositions?

Without the media the opposition will find it near impossible to establish an agenda item

Indeed, is it feasible to think of effective parliamentary opposition (large O or small o) without the self-styled opposition provided by the media?

What effect do the fortnightly opinion polls have upon the news cycle?

They are a regular news item and a permanent axe hanging over the head of the leader of the opposition

Role of Opposition - keeping Government Accountability — loss of senate

Your business is not to govern the country, but it is, if you think fit, to call to account those who govern it.

Gladstone

No Government can be long secure without a formidable Opposition

Disraeli in Bingham p 36

The duty of an Opposition is to oppose everything and propose nothing

George Tierney quoted by Lord Stanley in the Commons in June 1841

Whenever by an unfortunate occurrence of circumstance an Opposition is compelled to support the Government, the support should be given with a kick and not with a caress and should be withdrawn at the first available moment Lord Randolph Churchill

Who got rid of the recent leader of the NSW liberal Party opposition, John Brogden?
The Sordid Daily Telegraph

Even the Leader of the Opposition in the ACT Assembly, Brendon Smith has managed to generate a few challenge stories.

Journalists/Media

No news is good news. No journalists is even better

Nicolas Bentley 1907-78

All journalists are spies. I know, I've been one

Mobuto, President Zaire

The only qualities essential for real success in journalism are rat like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability. Other qualities are helpful but not essential - a knack with telephones, trains and petty officials, a good digestion and a steady head and the capacity to steal other people's ideas and phrases - that one about rat-like cunning was invented by my colleague Murray Sayle Nicholas Tomalin who was killed covering the Arab Israeli war in 1973

Being a newspaper man, I have been carefully trained to create the illusion that I know something about everything

Walter Lippmann Quoted in Bingham p210)

And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And behold there was a man named Zacchaeus ... and he sought to see Jesus ... and could not for (because of) the press St Luke

The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers.

Thomas Jefferson

The only way for a newspaperman to look at a politician is down

Anon - pos Mark Twain

There are two great dangers in journalism. The first is most virulent among editors. It creates a kaleidoscopic, chaotic, perpetual motion rhythm of the mind. As soon as you have produced one number of your paper you have to begin thinking of, and planning the next. Your mind gets into the habit of opening and shutting at regular intervals of 24 hours or seven days..... What you wrote for or published in last week's or yesterday's issue was written or published for a moment of time, last week, or yesterday; it is now dead or forgotten and now all that concerns you is what you are publishing or writing for this week or for today

Leonard Woolf

Politicians

Opposition

The more you read and observe about this politics thing, you got to admit that each party is worse than the other.

The one that's out always looks the best

Will Rogers 1879 1935 Illiterate Digest

It is a well known fact that those people who want to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.

Douglas Adams, - 1952-2001

A politician is a person who approaches every subject with an open mouth.

Anon

Of one notoriously leaden Parliamentary performer, Mungo MacCallum wrote, "No one ever seems to listen to what he says; and even after a few minutes, he gives the impression that, since he started speaking, amoebas have evolved into vertebrates, crawled out of the ocean, stood upright, and invented the wheel and the atomic bomb." Sally Warhaft *Well May we Say* pxii

Dreadful! Dreadful!

Last words of Sir Frederick Holder at 5.06 am on 23 July 1909 following a turbulent all night sitting in the House. Holder fell from the Speaker's chair exclaiming these words Sally Warhaft *Well May we Say* p 567

When the National Party leader John Anderson said politicians who could not keep their marriage vows should not be in Parliament, Mungo MacCallum responded that if these standards were applied vigorously "he'd be a mighty lonely politician in the Cabinet room, the party room and indeed the entire building".

Of the 11 prime ministers since World War II, he wrote he would "confidently back just two" to pass the Anderson test.

Julia Baird *Media Tarts* p200

For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance;
But from him that hath not, shall be taken away, even that which he hath
Mathew 25:29 - the Mathew Effect

Fine Line Ellen Fanning

Episode Six takes viewers inside the daily operations of a popular tabloid newspaper. The film-makers were granted virtually unlimited access to reporters and photographers on the Sydney News Limited publication The Daily Telegraph. The result is a forensic look at how this cheeky tabloid publication deliberately set out to grab the political agenda in the 2003 New South Wales election campaign. We follow the paper's chief reporter as he prowls the streets of the notorious Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, join a photographer on a clandestine stake-out of drug dealers and cross-examine the paper's patrician editor Campbell Reid, a man who makes no apology for what he calls his paper's "loud and provocative" voice.

Interviewees: Campbell Reid, editor; David Penberthy, reporter; Stephen Cooper, photographer; various other staff, The Daily Telegraph.

Talkback

Political leaders by pass the print interview

Go direct to the audience of the talk back

Their credibility not damaged by Cash for Comment (1999)

Yet attempts to discredit the ABC – Alston/Iraq War – even after multiple panels looked at his allegations he could get support for only a tiny minority

Glover (p213 of Manne Do not Disturb) observes that it's incredibly difficult for the polices to get enough sustained coverage to filter down to the average voter.

Howard had a forward pack of media supporters willing to pick up his message and run

Tabloid few ethical qualms