

## Case study 2

### The Murdoch papers and the 1975 'dismissal' election

Politicians call it bias against them, proprietors see it as their God-given right, editors see it as keeping their readers informed, the public tends not to be able to join the dots together—but get some political journalists together over a drink or three and they'll all have stories about interference in their reporting by their media masters. The classic case in Australia was the actions of Rupert Murdoch in the 1975 federal election that followed the dismissal by the Governor-General, the late John Kerr, of the Whitlam Labor Government. Murdoch and his media outlets had supported Whitlam in the 1972 'It's Time' election, Murdoch apparently donating more than \$74,000 (a tidy sum in those days) to the ALP campaign (McQueen 1977). On the twentieth anniversary of the 1975 dismissal, Murdoch is also quoted as saying, with some apparent glee, that reports of his involvement 'only tell half the story' (Wright 1995). Murdoch's overt interference in the 1975 campaign was so bad that reporters on the *Australian* went on strike in protest and seventy-five of them wrote to their boss calling the newspaper 'a propaganda sheet' and saying it had become 'a laughing stock' (Wright 1995). 'You literally could not get a favourable word about Whitlam in the paper. Copy would be cut, lines would be left out,' one former *Australian* journalist told Wright (1995). Alan Yates was a third-year cadet on the *Daily Mirror* and recalls the dismissal 'shocked the entire newsroom'. Yates was on the AJA House Committee and says that while Murdoch was not necessarily in the newsroom, 'his editors and his chiefs of staff were certainly involved in day-to-day selection of editorial content'. Alan Yates has said that he felt powerless as a 'junior reporter', but remembered his copy being altered to favour the Liberal Party's viewpoint: *When questioning the chiefs of staff and chief sub-editor about this I was clearly told that that was the editorial line, the editorial people had thought that it was a stronger angle. Therefore I was left not too many options to go.*

Hirst 1997a

Respected long-time political journalist Peter Bowers claims that when Malcolm Fraser offered former Murdoch employee John Menadue the post of Australian ambassador in Japan in late 1976, it meant more than the fulfilment

of a long-time interest in Japan. To Menadue the offer was 'the clincher', the proof that his old boss Rupert Murdoch 'had played an inside political role in the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975' (Bowers 1995). Bowers quotes Menadue as saying: 'Dangerous then (1975), more dangerous now. America and Britain may be able to accommodate him but our country is too small to live comfortably with an interventionist the size of Rupert Murdoch'. Another long-time political journalist Alan Ramsay (1999) once noted that 'throughout 1975 Murdoch was as interfering in his newspapers' pursuit of the Whitlam Government's destruction as he had been in its election'.

However, not all journalists were necessarily against what Murdoch did to support Malcolm Fraser in 1975. David Barnett has worked in and around the federal press gallery for most of his career in journalism and in November 1975 he was on Malcolm Fraser's staff. He remembers initially being impressed with Whitlam after 1972 and generally going along with the majority in the Gallery who welcomed the Labor Government. However, Barnett's mood changed dramatically over the three years of Whitlam's term as Prime Minister:

*As it became more and more obvious that these people had no idea of what they were doing and that the country was going down the drain, I moved my position from one of support for Gough, to the conviction that really as an Australian citizen I should do all I could to try and get rid of him.*

Hirst 1997b.

The dismissal of the Whitlam Government in November 1975 certainly created one of the longest, deepest and widest fault lines in Australian journalism. Journalistic friendships that broke over that issue have not been mended, despite the two main protagonists, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, having reconciled many years ago. One person who Whitlam has still not forgiven is the Governor-General who sacked him, Sir John Kerr.

Whitlam's booming voice will ring forever from recordings, even when his immortal words are erased from living memory: 'Well may we say "God save the Queen", for nothing can save the Governor-General.' In his regular column in Thursday's media section of *The Australian* at the time of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dismissal in 2005, Mark Day, who at the time editor of the

Sydney *Daily Mirror*, recalled they had a special edition on the streets within half an hour of hearing of Whitlam's dismissal. That evening Rupert went to his office and suggested they carry an editorial the next day saying 'More in sorrow than in anger, Gough's got to go' (Day, 2005). Day drafted 500 words around the theme, sent it to Rupert for approval, and it came back with only one word changed. The editorial inflamed some elements at a public protest in Sydney the day after, and hundreds of angry protesters marched on the *Mirror* building in Sydney to vent their anger (Day, 2005).

### **Issues and questions raised by case study 2**

- 1 Does the proprietor of a newspaper, magazine, radio, or television station have the absolute right to dictate editorial policy?
- 2 Would you have joined the strike against Murdoch's interventions at the *Australian* in November 1975?
- 3 How do you feel about reporters moving freely between journalism and jobs with political parties or lobby groups?
- 4 Did Alan Yates have the right to feel aggrieved when his copy was changed?
- 5 What do you think of David Barnett's decision to throw his support behind Malcolm Fraser?
- 6 What is the role of political reporting in Australia today?
- 7 How could it be different?

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