"The National Times: bastard of a paper"

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Chapter Two

Literature review

Research for the script navigated the history of the *National Times* from different angles: Why did such a great team of journalists come together? What else influenced editorial independence aside from James Fairfax’s chairmanship after 1978? Why was it such a dramatic era, politically? Where did the sustained adversarial style of the *National Times* come from? What precedents did it have in the media? What else was happening in the 1970s and 1980s that influenced it? Why did the journalists believe so strongly in the public right to know? What did ‘the public’ think about the revelations of corruption? Why was there so much corruption? Why did the *National Times*/*Times on Sunday* close? What happened to the journalists? How did the *National Times* fit into theories about investigative journalism? How relevant were politicians’ accusations of bias? This research has shaped the script. In her article, ‘Writing - a Method of Inquiry’, Laurel Richardson describes how,

In traditional staged research we valorise “triangulation” ... In that process, a researcher deploys “different methods” - such as interviews, exploration of census data, and document checking - to “validate” findings. These methods however carry the same *domain assumptions*, including the assumption that there is a “fixed point” or “object” that can be triangulated. But in postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate; we crystallise. We recognise that there are far more than “three sides” from which to approach the world...\(^{91}\)

The script draws on several areas of previous research: the history of the *National Times* and its journalists, the prominence of investigative reporting in the 1980s and the role of the ‘public’, the history of corruption in NSW, the rise of the right wing of the Labor Party during the 1970s and 1980s, and the increasing concentration of media ownership especially from 1986 through to 1988. This material does not figure prominently in ‘Bastard of a Paper’ due to the discipline of the traditional documentary structure in which almost every line focuses on the main character or how events directly affect that main character. However, this research did determine the political orientation of the script.

Discourses on journalism and politics in the 1980s in Australia typically describe the *National Times* as dominating the surge in investigative reporting during the 1980s: “...from the late seventies to the mid-eighties, the *National Times* was the leading investigative journal in Australia. It pushed the power of disclosure further than it had been before.”\(^{92}\) Likewise, Rodney Tiffen believes that the “newspaper that became most synonymous with highlighting its investigative prowess was the *National Times*, especially under the editorship of Brian Toohey...”\(^ {93}\) Julianne Schultz casts the 1980s as the pinnacle of investigative journalism in Australia.\(^ {94}\) Similarly David Mcknight states that;
... the decade of the 1980s was a ‘golden age’ of investigative journalism in Australia, of whom the best known outlets were the National Times newspaper and ABC TV’s Four Corners program. The period spawned a number of Royal Commissions, several minister [sic] of the crown resigned or were sacked and the issue of corruption in politics and the police force was firmly established in the public mind as never before.\textsuperscript{95}

Likewise Gary Sturgess describes “...the tradition pioneered by Bob Bottom\textsuperscript{96} and carried on throughout the 1970s and 1980s at Four Corners and the National Times...”\textsuperscript{97} Former journalist Tony Reeves, in Mr Big: The true story of Lennie McPherson and his life of crime (2005) recounts reporters such as himself and Bob Bottom writing doggedly - if intermittently - about organised crime at papers such as the Daily Telegraph, the Sunday Telegraph, the Daily Mirror and Nation Review in the late 1960s and 1970s. Reeves explains,

In the late 1960s, like so many of my colleagues who could not get their mainstream media employers to publish their ‘good’ reports - stories that could rattle the foundations (or at least ‘tremble the partitions’ as reporters used to quip) of our social and political structures - I regularly contributed articles to the somewhat rebellious Melbourne-based weekly Nation Review.\textsuperscript{98}

Corruption was common knowledge among reporters who sometimes drank at the same hotels as police and criminals (such as the aforementioned Lennie McPherson). Reeves describes how they were often hindered by publishers’ laziness or fear of defamation suits and intimidation by ‘stand over men.’\textsuperscript{99}

David McKnight traces the origins of 1980s investigative journalism to mainly populist newspapers and journals such as Smith’s Weekly (1919 - 1950)\textsuperscript{100} and Truth (post WW2)\textsuperscript{101} in Sydney. In Melbourne, he believes Truth post 1965\textsuperscript{102} and the quality Herald\textsuperscript{103} are precedents. McKnight describes the blind spot in the pre-1980s press to police corruption.\textsuperscript{104} He gauges the success of earlier material, which focused on individual injustices more favourably than that of the 1980s - which he says - tried to address systemic corruption. McKnight briefly acknowledges the influence of the 1960s/1970s era of social reform on investigative reporting of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{105} In western countries, this era affected society’s expectations of the media and the government - and some journalists’ understanding of their role - in favour of a robust reporting of politics. The National Times journalists were part of this generation - affected to varying degrees by egalitarian and ‘social conscience’ values. Such values were not new. Neither did the journalists of this generation necessarily protest against the Vietnam war. However, during this era - dissent was more widespread.
Max Walsh (1979) and Donald Horne (1987) both contend that the press changed from being relatively passive, in the 1950s and the 1960s, to being more rigorous in the political arena of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{106} Mungo MacCallum (2001) and John Hurst (1988) describe adversarial reporting in the seventies.\textsuperscript{107} Texts about the history of \textit{Four Corners} also provided an overview of these changes in the media and Australian society.\textsuperscript{108} Frank Crowley (1986) and Anne Coombs (1996) (to a lesser degree as she is writing about the ‘Sydney Push’ rather than the whole of society) show how activism impacted on life in Australia, be it the protests against the South African Springboks rugby tour or the ‘green bans.’\textsuperscript{109}

Concurrent with these changes in the press was a build-up in corruption in the NSW Police Force, judiciary and politics. David Hickie (1985) and Evan Whitton (1987A) chart its growth\textsuperscript{110} and attribute it to the use of Sydney as a ‘rest and recreation’ (R&R) destination during the Vietnam War and the Premiership of Bob Askin. Conversely, Geoffrey Reading (1989) argues against the build-up of corruption and any link to Askin.\textsuperscript{111} Richard Hall (1986) connects the murky network of extortion and bribery with the unrealistic laws regulating gambling, sex work and the sale of alcohol especially in the sixties/seventies era of ‘sex, drugs and rock n’ roll.’\textsuperscript{112} Athol Moffitt (1985) recounts the ineffectiveness of successive governments, such as the Wran government, in countering the ‘greased palm’.\textsuperscript{113} Anne Coombs (1996) (in part) depicts big business, police and union corruption in the context of the early seventies green bans.\textsuperscript{114} Peter Rees (2004) similarly portrays the unsolved murder of activist Juanita Nielsen in 1975.\textsuperscript{115} John Dale (2000) writes in the same vein about the unsolved murder of whistle blower Sally Anne Huckstepp in 1986.\textsuperscript{116} Former policewoman and whistle blower Deborah Locke (2003) gives an insider’s view of police vice\textsuperscript{117} in the eighties. Thus, there is a significant body of literature about organised crime in Sydney which vindicates the adversarial style of \textit{National Times} investigative journalism.

Rodney Tiffen (1999) validates the media - despite its faults - when he examines the interface between corruption stories (including some of those in the script) and the political context.\textsuperscript{118} Grabosky and Wilson (1989) explore the obstacles confronting investigative journalism in Australia in the 1980s through the perspectives of reporters.\textsuperscript{119} They also describe the consequent ‘burnout’ of such journalists. To a lesser degree, Schultz (1991) also researched Australian reporters’ attitudes to investigative work.\textsuperscript{120} Schultz argues that editorial independence and a strong editor, such as Brian Toohey at the \textit{National Times}, underpin the ‘hard-nosed’ journalism in the 1980s in Australia. Journalist Chris Masters (1998) gives an account of his work for the Four Corners investigative program ‘The Moonlight State’.\textsuperscript{121} In ‘Corruption and Reporting Corruption in Australia’, Masters (1992) decries Australian beliefs\textsuperscript{122} which foster corruption and inhibit reporting. Dickie (1992) criticises the traditional ‘reporting the facts’ approach.\textsuperscript{123}

The ‘back-scratching’ between media magnates and politicians\textsuperscript{124} in the 1980s created an
environment in which investigative journalism ‘stuck out like a sore thumb’. Steketee and Cockburn (1986), Wilkinson (1996) and Barry (2000) discuss the rise of the right wing of the ALP in the seventies and eighties which led to unprecedented bonds with media owners and the transference of this agenda to the Hawke Government. (However, they also explain Wran’s motivation in the late seventies - when historically, the media had supported the Liberal Party.) They explore the outcome in 1986 and 1987 which was the sale of HWT to Murdoch, the cross media ownership laws and the concentration of media ownership. Carroll (1990), Chadwick (1989) and Bowman (1988) especially depict the political pressure on media companies and the expediency at work in the sell-out of the Australian media in the late eighties. It was in this dramatic context as the federal government sought to ease out critics before the July 1987 election that the Times on Sunday ‘folded’. Similarly Souter, in his history of Fairfax provides a detailed record of the manoeuvrings between the media companies, the NSW government and the Federal Government.

Literature which censures the National Times investigative reporting is uncommon. Dr Jenny Hocking (1997) criticises the National Times Age Tapes stories. She argues that the journalists, naively or not, fell in with an alleged political persecution of High Court Justice Lionel Murphy (for his left wing politics) because in 1984, it was rumoured that Lionel Murphy would be made Chief Justice of the High Court. Describing an earlier underhanded attempt to remove him from the High Court in 1976, Dr Hocking states, “Whilst this initial action which could have dislodged Murphy was ultimately unsuccessful, it was not unconnected to the second attempt, which began publicly with the cover story of the National Times in November 1983, ‘Big Shots Bugged’.” David Brown (1987A) describes “the media prosecution of Lionel Murphy”. Brown argues that the journalism individualised something that should have been treated more broadly - including how to process allegations of judicial impropriety. Sylvia Lawson (Brown 1987B) submits that, “Libertarian notions of free enquiry - begging all questions of what it might be free from, or for - collaborated with the romantic fearlessness - investigation mythology to produce an inquisition, a vicious trial by media job in which guilt was presumed from the outset.”

Former National Times journalists counter-argue that Lionel Murphy’s supporters expected them to make an exception for Murphy because, as Evan Whitton describes, he was “a great jurist” and a ‘lefty’ - ‘one of the good guys’. However, Wendy Bacon believes that the focus on Murphy was in part due to the Federal and NSW state Government which “quickly closed ranks against the possibility of an open inquiry. To the extent that Murphy, as a high court judge, was left exposed as the most obvious target for the Federal Opposition, he too was a victim of Labor’s cover-up.” Bacon reasons that,

The editorial position of the National Times, and my own personal view, was in support of an open Royal Commission into the circumstances in which the tapes were made and into the network of criminals, lawyers
and public officials - ranging from immigration officials, a NSW public servant who could influence casino applications (discussed in the tapes), a magistrate and a judge... 

Thus, the era and its events remain controversial. This thesis is not an attempt to resolve debates over the Age Tapes. Rather, it explores the origins and context of the National Times adversarial journalism. Further, it validates the ‘watchdog’ role of the media - because despite its perceived faults - it is “an indispensable means of holding rulers to account [and the]... unmasking of corruption and institutional abuses is the cutting edge of political accountability.”