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BLOG: Parlous state of politics

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BLOG: Parlous state of politics

Abstract

Two events in the last week serve to highlight both the parlous state of politics and the importance of investigative journalism. First, the revelations of the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) hearings; second, the verdict finding Bradley Manning guilty of espionage. These decisions both have profound ramifications not only for journalism but also for federal politics. The stench of corruption surrounding the NSW Labor Party has become stronger following the ICAC recommendations that Eddie Obeid and Ian Macdonald be charged with criminal offences.

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By ANTHONY ASHBOLT Aug. 2, 2013, 10:03 p.m.



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First, the revelations of the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) hearings; second, the verdict finding Bradley Manning guilty of espionage. These decisions both have profound ramifications not only for journalism but also for federal politics.

The stench of corruption surrounding the NSW Labor Party has become stronger following the ICAC recommendations that Eddie Obeid and Ian Macdonald be charged with criminal offences.

These two men held power far beyond their individual portfolios. Obeid, it appears, virtually ran the NSW's Labor Party because of his pivotal role in the right wing Terrigal faction. And while MacDonald ended up on the right, he spent most of his career on the left of the Party, so none of the factions come out looking good and, to be frank, there is no real ideological difference between the right and the so-called left these days.

This is not just a story of a couple of crooks because the Labor Party itself did allow corruption to fester.

Yet we are not just dealing with Labor here, as the shady dealings involved powerful businessman, including Ron Medich, Travers Duncan and John Kinghorn. The murky alliance between these shadowy figures and Obeid and MacDonald sheds light as much on the workings of capitalism and property development as it does on the Labor Party. Memories of similar things in the Wollongong corruption scandal have come flooding back.

[PREVIOUS BLOG: Refugees a "political whipping boy" \(http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1646899/blog-refugees-a-political-whipping-boy/\)](http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1646899/blog-refugees-a-political-whipping-boy/)

Federal Labor is necessarily tainted by ICAC findings. This is why Abbott, who has been sulking somewhat recently, finally has something to grin about.

The intervention into the NSW Branch planned by Kevin Rudd was necessary but probably not as far-reaching as it should have been. Genuine party reform requires much more than the sort of minor tinkering sponsored by limited federal intervention. Even the attempt to gain 50% rank and file representation on the Administrative Committee seems to have fallen short, with a report in Thursday's Sydney Morning Herald suggesting it will only be 40%.

And speaking of the Herald, its feats of investigative journalism that led to the ICAC enquiry must be celebrated. Without the tireless foot-slogging efforts of Kate McClymont, in particular, but also Linton Besser and others, we would still be in the dark.

This sort of thorough investigative journalism is under serious threat as the business model of newspapers continues to shrink steadily. The Watergate scandal would never have been revealed in America if The Washington Post proprietor Katherine Graham had not given Woodward and Bernstein completely free hands to pursue their various lines of enquiry.

Quality investigative journalism often depends upon whistleblowers. Without whistleblowers many uncomfortable facts would remain hidden and this is what make the case of Bradley Manning so significant and so sad. While acquitting Bradley Manning of the most serious charge of aiding the enemy, the military judge found him guilty of espionage and he could still face a sentence of well over 100 years in gaol.

And all this for telling us via Wikileaks of the truth, the horrible truth, about war. Julian Assange has spoken eloquently in Manning's defence and this serves to remind us that our own

Government has been guilty of refusing to defend the rights of Assange properly.

While bleating loudly about how the book should be thrown at corrupt individuals in NSW Labor, the Federal Labor Government has no interest in defending the legal rights of those who reveal the corruption of war.

Its recent legislation, the Public Interest Disclosure Act, supposedly designed to protect whistleblowers, excludes material classified as intelligence or anything to do with intelligence agencies.

So now is the time to remember both the triumphs of genuine investigative journalism and the failures of Governments that seek to hide the truth.

Dr Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong. He specialises in American politics and history but has taught and written about Australian politics and media politics for many years. He will be blogging for the Mercury on the Federal election campaign.

He is the main editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013). He is also co-author (with colleague Glenn Mitchell) of a chapter in the recently published Red Strains: Music and Communism outside the Communist Bloc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong.

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