

# Parliamentary Press Gallery Committee

The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery contains about 300 reporters, camera operators and photographers and includes representatives from all of the main media organisations in Australia.

The Gallery Committee is an umbrella organisation which represents the media in its general dealings with Parliament. However, each media organisation has its own approach to individual news stories.

As such, the Gallery Committee points out the following submission represents the views of the authors alone.

However, the Gallery Committee endorses the paper because it is an indication of a general concern about restrictions on access to information during events off Christmas Island last year.

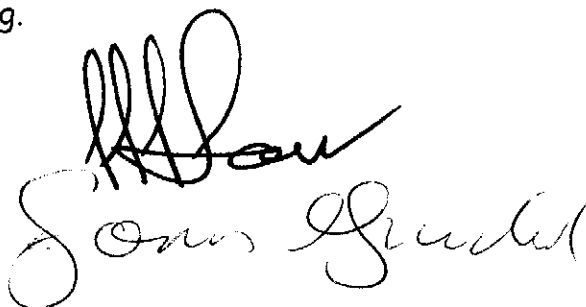
In general, Gallery reporters and their readers, viewers and listeners were denied quality information on a nationally important situation.

The military professionals were gagged and a political officer working for then Defence Minister Peter Reith was the sole contact point.

The Gallery Committee believes the restriction was unwarranted and the supply of facts appalling.

Malcolm Farr (President)

James Grubel (Secretary)

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The top signature is for Malcolm Farr, and the bottom signature is for James Grubel. Both signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

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## SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO A CERTAIN MARITIME INCIDENT

A Government campaign of censorship and misinformation, which peaked during the Tampa incident and continued through the HMAS Adelaide 'children overboard' affair, is unprecedented in recent times.

It involved the Ministries of Defence and Immigration as well as the office of the Prime Minister.

However, the high level of deliberate deception -- which came clearly to light in Senate Estimates committee hearings -- could not have been perpetrated without the involvement of senior and junior public servants.

As well as fostering feelings of distrust and resentment in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, this affair has underscored an urgent requirement for safeguards and guidelines to avoid a repeat of such blatant political manipulation of the bureaucracy. The need for such controls was particularly acute during the caretaker period of an election campaign.

Former Defence Minister Peter Reith and members of his staff, not least former press secretary Ross Hampton, chief of staff Peter Hendy and military adviser Mike Scrafton, were clearly at the centre of efforts to prevent the truth coming out regarding false claims that asylum seekers threw children into the sea in October of last year.

However, Defence media liaison and the public affairs apparatus of the Department of Immigration bowed to political pressure to spread government falsehoods or stonewall media inquiries.

Senior officers such as the Secretary of Defence, Dr Allan Hawke, and Defence Chief Admiral Chris Barrie went along with a direction to refer all media questioning of the untrue 'children overboard' claims back to Mr Reith's office.

During the caretaker period numerous requests for information and interviews with senior military officers, including Admiral Barrie, were still referred to Reith's office. Defence was told on numerous occasions during this time that under caretaker conventions it had an obligation to not act in a political manner and to provide factual responses to reasonable questions.

This submission includes some detail of what was clearly false information given to media by Mr Hampton and others in response to questioning.

Your Committee will already have access to the public statements of Mr Reith, Mr Ruddock, Mr Howard and others. And your committee will have ample evidence from other sources about the timing of warnings given to the Government -- including by senior military personnel -- that there was no evidence of children being thrown overboard and that the photographs released to the public had been seriously misrepresented.

We invite the Committee to view the answers given in response to journalists' questions -- by ministers and/or staff and officials -- against the backdrop of what, it has since been revealed, they knew at the time.

The following material is illustrative rather than comprehensive. Many dozens of journalists are angry about having been lied to.

As Press Gallery President Malcolm Farr observed in the Sydney Daily Telegraph on October 13, 2001:

"There has been a deliberate program of censorship on a scale which would not be out of place during a war. But this has not been a war. It has been a matter of immigration policy".

The following exchanges between journalists and Ross Hampton illustrate the point:

OCTOBER 10

J: Given the controversy and Ruddock's uncertainty we're seeking more clarity about events?

H: Those who seek to cast doubts on the navy's information as supplied to the government in this are doing a great injustice to the navy. The information has been supplied and stands.

OCTOBER 12

J: This started because Ruddock made this statement about people being thrown into the water.

H: Which was an accurate statement.

NOVEMBER 9

J: When were the photographs released on October 10 taken?

H: Defence public affairs communicated that they had pictures of this event. They were given to the minister. He checked with senior people in the ADF about releasing them and as long as their identities were obscured, and that discussion revolved around removing the identifying captions which named ADF people. Those photos were subsequently released and that's the end of the story.

J: He (Shackleton) had also given contrary advice which he hasn't retracted.

H: I've really got to go with the position that the chief of navy put at 7 o'clock last night. That's his statement on the public record, unprompted by any minister of prime minister. That's the position I'll respond to.

NB: Admiral Shackleton later revealed to Senate Estimates that Mr Reith's chief-of-staff Peter Hendy had phoned him urging him to "clarify" his comments.

Peter Reith can be seen as both part of a problem and symptomatic of a wider malaise. Mr Reith began his tenure with a blunt warning to the Defence organisation that it answered to his government through the minister and they had better understand who was boss.

At a senior leadership summit on february 11, 2001 he said the following:

"Defence is a unique organisation but it is not a government within the government. It is responsible to the government.

"So no one should feel any responsibility to have published the internal operations of the government. I can assure you if there is anything really public to be said, I am more than capable of saying it.

"If Defence cannot keep national secrets how can the government be expected to work closely with you."

The demand to keep secret the real secrets quickly broadened to become a demand that everything in Defence should be secret.

Taking Reith at his word Defence created a new system of oversight for all public and semi-public statements by all Defence personnel. The guidelines meant that even academic papers prepared for professional journals had to be submitted for media vetting.

By the time of the children overboard incident even these controls were not enough.

All inquiries were dealt with by the minister's office.

Secrecy was not used for operational reasons but to control information for maximum political effect.

The Reith approach placed extraordinary new limits on what would normally be regarded as the professional responsibilities and rights of the Australian Defence Force.

The censorship and information control program reached a head when the MV Tampa rescued more than 430 asylum seekers close to Christmas Island in August 2001.

Reith's office invoked the "operational security" excuse as soon as the SAS and the navy were despatched. Defence was ordered to direct all calls to the minister's office.

Once the ship reached Christmas Island the situation deteriorated to the point where soldiers even prevented a civilian aircraft chartered by news organisations from taking off on the island's airstrip. Martial law had not been invoked and yet basic democratic rights were being trampled over for a political imperative under the guise of "operational security".

New heights of absurdity were reached when the Immigration Department's senior spokesman Stewart Foster was sent to Nauru and ordered by the minister's office not to give any information or make any statements to the media.

Throughout the passage of HMAS Manoora with her human cargo from Christmas Island to Nauru, Reith's office refused to provide any meaningful information and ordered officials to do likewise.

Those officials suffered such harassment and haranguing from the minister's staff, especially Hampton, that by the time the HMAS Adelaide-SIEV 4 incident occurred

defence media had been cowed.

The lack of information and deliberate misleading promulgated by Reith's office was countered to some extent by background briefings.

However, crucial information, such as the truth of the children throwing allegations and the veracity of photographs distributed to prove the point, remained a mystery throughout the election campaign.

By the time the Senate Estimates hearings came around in February many in Defence had simply had enough. They had been used, abused and scapegoated but some honourable officers finally set the record straight.

The debacle involving CDF Admiral Chris Barrie and his senior officers had its beginnings in Peter Reith's office months beforehand. Had the campaign of censorship and misinformation not begun then the truth of the children overboard affair would have been revealed much earlier and the CDF himself would have been forced to find out the facts before causing such fundamental damage to his own command.

A number of journalists tell of concerted Australian Government efforts to stop them gaining access to asylum seekers taken to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. These were the people who were falsely accused of throwing their children into the sea.

The ABC's Four Corners Program highlighted how journalist Fran Kelly received a disingenuous answer from the Prime Minister at the National Press Club when she pressed him on defence sources stating that children had not been thrown overboard. That example of deliberate obfuscation became prominent because it was filmed and recorded. Behind the scenes, there is widespread resentment among journalists over their being lied to.

We submit that the professional standards and standing of the ADF were compromised by the Reith doctrine. The demands for secrecy and for information to be vetted by the Minister's office has had some operational negatives as well.

Those within Defence responsible for doctrine and training report frustration at getting accurate internal accounts of what was involved in the Navy blockade in the Indian Ocean. The culture of secrecy has clearly gone too far when it harms the force's own ability to find out what its members are doing and disseminate information so lessons can be drawn.

This affair also damaged relations within the Defence chain of command as well as the standing of Defence within the Australian community.

The phrase "operational secrecy" is in danger of becoming a joke along the lines of "airline food" and "reality television".

Defence emphasises the importance of complete responsibility and trust up and down its chains of command. It has jeopardised that trust in its treatment of its own people as well as the media. Many officers in Defence recognise the damage done to their profession.

Defence would do well to reflect on how it has acted on its own doctrine for dealing with the media and public.

The Army's 1993 land warfare manual said: "The media has the capacity to provide a powerful and influential instrument for 'real time' reporting of military actions to a vast audience. Although governments may censor military details, the maintenance of Australian domestic support and understanding of ADF operations is of great importance to the national effort. History indicates that it is usually counter productive to conceal adverse information to protect political interests. It is unlikely that the Australian Government will impose media censorship during low-level conflict. Poor relations with the media, and the withholding of information may lead to speculative and inaccurate reporting, whilst the passing of disinformation and propaganda is a clear breach of the trust that is necessary between commanders and the media."

In this affair - which does not even rate as "low level" conflict - a form of censorship was imposed by the refusal to allow reporters onto Navy vessels and the channelling of all information through the Minister's office. Disinformation used for political propaganda was passed. Trust was breached. The public's right to know suffered. And perhaps the greatest damage was done to the standing of the ADF.

This submission is not intended to create any perception of party political bias. There would be an equal level of hostility were the same sort of cynical manipulation to

occur under a future Labor Government.

Its purpose is to help set the record straight and to secure the development of guidelines to protect those honest public servants and politicians who still believe in open and accountable government.

If the government wants the media to convey a positive image of an increasingly recruit starved military force to the mums and dads of Australia it should consign the Reith doctrine to the dustbin of history.

As for defence media it should never again allow a minister or a minister's staff to cower and abuse it to the extent witnessed during the Reith period.

National security should never be confused with political self-interest.

Attached to this submission are some relevant articles, including several detailing a new information regime in Defence.

We have also attached some written questions put by the Sydney Morning Herald to Defence Force Chief Admiral Barrie, Defence Department Secretary Dr Allan Hawke, Mr Reith and Mr Ruddock.

There were no revelations from Mr Ruddock's office, despite the specific nature of the questioning.

Significantly, one question directed to Admiral Barrie and Dr Hawke asked if they had knowledge of an "official cover-up of the circumstances surrounding the incidents of October 7/8, notably in relation to the false claim that children were thrown overboard?"

There was a single response from Mr Tim Bloomfield, at the Public Affairs and Corporate Communications Division of the Defence Department, stating that all the matters raised should be directed to Mr Reith.

There was an unwillingness by officials to provide honest responses to questions even though Mr Reith and the rest of the Government were in caretaker mode just before the federal election.

Geoffrey Barker, Australian Financial Review

Andrew Clennell, Sydney Morning Herald.

Graeme Dobell, ABC Radio/Radio Australia.

Mark Forbes, The Age.

Chris Hammer, SBS TV.

Fran Kelly, ABC 7.30 Report.

Ian McPhedran, News Limited.

Jim Middleton, ABC TV News.

Craig Skehan, Sydney Morning Herald