SENATE ADDRESS

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TWO CULTURES: PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA

The brief I was given when I was invited to present this speech concluded with a fairly bleak assessment of the relative roles of the Parliament and the Media. The questions posed were these:

> "We can lament the fact that politicians now see the media as a more important forum than Parliament, but should we blame them for accepting the raw realities and regarding appearances on talkback radio or the *7.30 Report* as more effective means of communication than a speech in the Senate or the House? What share has Parliament had in its own decline as a forum for debate and to what extent is it simply the victim of the proliferation of communications media during the past two centuries?"

Now to be fair to those who very kindly invited me to address you today, this rather jaundiced assessment of the relative importance of the Parliament and the Media as forums of debate was prepared at the end of the last session, not long after a gruelling election campaign.

This week of course marks the beginning of a new session, a new parliament, a renewed government, opposition parties in review mode, and other minor parties and independents contemplating the best way of representing their constituents and exercising their influence. And in the gallery, at the entrances and in the corridors of this building an excited and/or world weary groups of journalists are ready – according to the current routines of political reporting - to catch the grabs as they are uttered in the Parliament, on the door steps, or drawn from the voluminous transcripts of other interviews and doorstops, or the whispered backgrounders in corridors and over mobile phones, and craft them into stories that make sense of complex policy or issues or power plays for their various audiences.

And because the relationship between the parliament and the media is not just between politicians and their staffs and the journalists I should also mention the battalions of media executives who have been discretely knocking on doors since November 11, seeking modifications to a range of media policies that could shape their companies' futures.

Issues of representation and communication are common to all the players on this particular field although there are fundamental differences of outcome and culture, some of which I will come to later.

Those questions in the briefing note I received just before Christmas made me think about whether it was true that members of parliament would really prefer a possibly caustic five minutes with Kerry O'Brien or Alan Jones than the opportunity to expound on an important matter of policy or public importance in the House or the Senate. No doubt they would reach a bigger audience, but a brief interview couldn't replace the subtlety and complexity of the deliberative process in the parliament, surely. Then again maybe these questions pointed to the beginning of a new form of direct politics played out in TV and radio studios, rather than on the floor of the House or the Senate, with a worm or internet buzzer ready to pass judgement at every twist and nuance, and talkback hosts prepared to act as intermediaries with clout, for citizens dissatisfied with the traditional processes.

As I considered these questions I knew that they were not new – indeed not long after the press had won its quasi institutional status as the fourth estate, its relative strength *vis a vis* the parliament was being questioned:

> "from slight beginnings the press has overshadowed and surpassed the other estates…It has obtained paramount influence and authority party by assuming them, but still more by deserving them…it is unquestionably the most grave, noticeable and formidable phenomenon of our times."

Now George Reeves, who wrote this in 1855, was given to a particular style of nineteenth century hyperbole, but there is an interesting echo – indeed it is possibly truer today than it was then. Not

everyone shared Reeves' views, just as today the media has both its boosters and its critics, who see its methods corroding other institutions and possibly even the fabric of our society.

So I thought it might be useful to construct a couple of questions about the role of the media in relation to the parliamentary process in the same spirit as those I read a minute ago. They might go something like this:

> "We can lament the fact that politicians now seek to use the media in a way that avoids serious consideration of complex issues and substitutes it with well rehearsed one-liners and emotive phrases, but hasn't the media brought it on itself in its desire for controversy, conflict and simplicity? What part has the media played in its own marginalisation, is it simply a victim of its own success?"

There are probably a dozen other questions that could be thrown into this particularly overheated pot – but they all tend to point to a sense of what I want to describe as *institutional disappointment*. I believe that there is a gnawing sense of disappointment that some of our important public institutions do not serve us as well as they might, that maybe they do not adequately meet the changing expectations of the times.

I am not one of those who subscribes to the idea that our public institutions are in crisis, or in need of fundamental reform – at least not in most cases. They are resilient and have served us well. But I do think that there is a need for some refreshment to ensure that they are firmly grounded in the rituals and expectations of the 21st century rather than the 19th.

So that is what I will do today. Look at the principles that led to the establishment of the media as a quasi institution of the parliamentary process, a bastard fourth estate, assess some of the current strengths and weaknesses of the relationship and suggest some alternatives that draw on the past and seek to anticipate the future.

One of the most important insights that comes from the study of institutional creation and policy formation over time is that things which we now take for granted were in many cases just someone's bright idea, which they pursued doggedly, tested in debate, grabbing opportunities as they arose to refine, develop and implement. The Parliament is itself to some extent such a creation, certainly the role of the media as an adjunct to the parliamentary process is.

There is a seeming immutability about the idea of the Fourth Estate: that the media should report and provide scrutiny of the debates in Parliament and the policy outcomes. It has however long been a matter of contest. The notion of the Fourth Estate has changed and developed over the past two centuries. It was briefly just a description of the place where reporters sat, but within a couple of decades had become "the feedback mechanism of democratic system management". Nonetheless the words *the Fourth Estate* conjure an image every bit as solid as the gothic stone of Westminster, the elegant dome of the US Congress or the submerged walls of this beautiful building.

But it was not always thus. I would like therefore to trace briefly the process by which the fourth estate moved from being a place, where reporters sat, to an idea which was integral to the democratic political process.

This idea has never been never cast in stone, or even scribbled in the margins of the Australian constitution. It was only a decade ago that the High Court affirmed the constitutional importance of freedom of political speech. Justice Brennan wrote at the time, "It would be a parody of democracy to confer on the people a power to choose their parliament, but deny them the freedom of public discussion from which they derive their political judgement." That of course depends on access to all the necessary information to make such judgements.

Despite these High Court rulings no tablets of stone defining an institutional role for the press have been handed down in this country. Indeed while many would welcome a constitutional recognition of freedom of expression, any legislative attempt to define the role and nature of the press would make most nervous. While the role of the media has more often been defined in the negative, by limits,

exclusions, caveats and so on, the tension that comes from quasi institutional status of a commercial agency is fundamentally healthy in a democracy.

There is a little game that is sometimes played by pedants and trivia freaks about the origin of the term fourth estate: who used it first, was it Macaulay, was it Burke, was it Hazlitt. This can be interesting, but like many games of trivial pursuit misses, what to me at least is the more interesting question. And that is the process by which the idea of the fourth estate came to be accepted in eighteenth century Britain, its colonies and around the world.

As I said before there was no great handing down of the tablets, although some may point to the decision to include a gallery for reporters in the new parliament at Westminster as such recognition. That was the moment after years of debate when the fourth estate eventually became a place, more than just a bench where reporters had been allowed to sit and take notes squeezed in between others. It had taken two decades to become an idea, as John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859:"No argument can now be needed against permitting a legislature or executive...to prescribe opinions or determine what doctrines or arguments the people shall be allowed to hear." The opinion journals of the eighteenth century had been alive with argument – erudite, articulate, sophisticated debate that fostered the creation of many of the Enlightment institutions and ways of seeing and thinking that are now more commonplace than the food we eat.

The role of public opinion, the importance of reporting, the need to give people access to information to allow debate to occur and informed opinions to be created was one of the big debates – an issue for the elites that became in today's jargon "a hot button issue" for the masses with the publication and suppression of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man in 1792.

Those in positions of power, like their successors and predecessors were profoundly uneasy with this trend. They preferred printers who were more interested in making money than some higher purpose. They used blunt instruments of exclusion and censorship and then more subtle tools of regulation and tax to try to put the press and the public discussion of ideas in its place. But the resilience of the idea, which had been tested and argued, prevailed. In the colony of NSW the administrators gave up the

unequal battle and allowed tax free newspapers to be distributed well before similar decisions were made in Westminster.

The landmarks in the debate that led to the creation of the press as a quasi institution are probably worth recapping, not least because it gives a sense of how long it can take before an idea really takes root in a society, and becomes a self evident truth.

1644: Milton published his famous anti censorship tract Areopagitica

1660: House of Commons resolved no one could report its debates

1765: American newspaper refused to pay the British license fees

1770: British papers won freedom from prior restraint, after printers were jailed for reporting debates, released by the Major of London who was then jailed himself – it was clearly becoming time consuming and silly

1791: American constitution declared freedom of expression

1792: Fox's libel laws reduced penalties and introduced juries

1802: William Cobbett began the weekly *Political Register*

1803: a bench set aside for reporters in the House of Commons at direction of the Speaker

1824: first Australian newspaper established without prior official approval

1826: censorship abolished in Australian colonies, stamp duty removed

1834: Lord McCauley referred to the reporters as being the fourth estate, more important than the other estates

1852: Delane editorialised in The Times about the different yet complementary nature of journalism and statecraft

1853 – 61: stamp duty abolished

1855: Reeve declared the press created the wont which it supplied and was more important than the other estates

1859: John Stuart Mill declared the need for a free press was self evident.

It was a long slow process. The thing which most interests me about this is that the idea of the press as the fourth estate was not handed down in molten lead letterpress, but was the result of robust argument. More importantly, and this has a couple of key parallels with the situation we face today, the press was able to create the wont which it supplied.

The press was its own best advocate – using every means available to advance the case of its institutional role. Of course it was not an institution, it was not elected, nor appointed by virtue of birth or good works, it derived its success from the marketplace. So it was an institution of the political process, but was not directly a part of that process, and measured its success in pounds, shillings and pence. The bastard estate had its feet in commerce and its head in public affairs.

Rather than decrying the commercial nature of the media, its very commercial nature gave it – and continues to give it - its authority, its independence and ultimately its power. The ability of the nineteenth century press to create the wont which it then supplied could be restated in the somewhat less elegant language of the twenty-first century, as an idea whose time had come.

So what are the characteristics of this time more than two centuries later, what are the expectations, values, possibilities? Do we need to rethink the relationship between the media and the parliament, or at least recast or reinvent it in some way?

The world as we know it is profoundly different to that in which the idea of the fourth estate took root. Let me just run through a few salient differences: suffrage is now universal and mandatory, the population is overwhelmingly literate, almost everyone has had at least ten years of schooling, the society as a whole is much richer, there are fewer unknowns, human rights are widely understood and accepted, people expects to have access to information and for their opinion to count. These days the media reaches into every minute of our lives – 8 hours work, 8 hours play, 8 hours rest and depending on how much the media influences your dreams, maybe 20 hours of media in print, on TV, in the air, on the computer, in the public places. It is not surprising that the media and communications business chews up $25 billion a year in this country alone.

The prevailing established viewpoint is established, developed and maintained through a complex machinery of information and communication. The capacity of the media to turn the level of civilisation up or down a notch is still important, but the elements involved are more diverse and sophisticated than they were even a few decades ago.

As I said at the beginning I think that it is necessary to understand the antecedents of our current institutions, and quasi institutions, if we are to imagine how they may change in the future.

I would now like to propose a solution which may go some small way towards addressing the institutional disappointment I mentioned earlier. In the 19th century George Reeves, celebrated the

process by which the press had developed a voice of its own, and was no longer merely an echo chamber of the other 'estates'. The attempts to ensure that the echo is in place are more sophisticated than ever as you would expect for the billions spent on public communication.

It seems to me that much of the political reporting that we have today is stripped of complexity. There simply isn't the space or the time to do otherwise. We get at best a layering of different perspectives and assertions, claim and counter claim built over the course of a few days or longer. Who can remember who said what, and what was really right or true. As the ideological underpinnings of political debate have become more blurred the distinctions are harder to hang on to. So not surprisingly much political reporting focuses on the theatre, the spectacle, the gaffes and nuances. Single words and phrases bounce around the airwaves framing the public discussion. Emotion has supplanted logic as the principle tool of debate. A simple clear exposition of facts and rationale rarely cuts through the one-liners, the rhetoric, the spin, the code words and the masked ideology. It is no wonder that we retreat into our preconceptions.

Cynicism has become the new bedrock of this country over the past decade or so, it has become been pretty impenetrable and to some extent demoralised our political institutions. Suspicion and fear of manipulation has undermined the confidence of many Australians in their ability to think through complex issues. The cynicism that fuelled the One Nation phenomenon has now been supplemented with the most skilful media management ever seen in this country. This all contributes to the sense of *institutional disappointment* I mentioned earlier.

As someone who has worked as journalist and editor, who has taught journalism, and has to some extent been involved in the hand to hand combat of media policy formation, I feel that there is a gap between what I consume in the media and what I know is going on in areas of policy formation and development. I don't blame anyone for this – I understand the pressures journalists and editors work under, I know some of the tricks that media managers use to ensure that their take on stories and issues reaches a mass audience and I have a sense of the pressure that policy makers are under, as one state departmental head said recently, 'forget the detail, give me the one liner'.

As I said before the media management at play today is of an order of magnitude more sophisticated than we have ever seen before in this country. It is not the simple control of the old elites; it is slippery, skilful, sometimes abusive and well grounded in the real and imagined fears and expectations of us all. It doesn't leave much space for new ideas.

So I and many others feel a sense of institutional disappointment. At a time when there is more media, why does it seem that there is less detail, less of the fabric of the underpinning rationale, process and outcomes? The media searchlight shines brightly for a few minutes before moving to the next event, that is its job. Sometimes we feel satisfied, sometimes not, sometimes feeling like a child with ADD hoping the next Ritalin will help us make sense of the big picture.

This at a time when technology makes it possible for us to access more detail than ever before – to read the court judgements, to consider the full reports, to examine the data on a thousand and one web sites – making the quick retreat to one liners and snappy phrases is somewhat paradoxical. The ease of access to voluminous information is a challenge to the reductionist inverted pyramid of journalism and its demand for brevity, clarity and simplicity.

So we are reduced to policy one liners, which are deliberately uttered, rarely meaningfully challenged, and endlessly circulated, as highlighted transcripts of previous interviews form the basis of the next.

I understand that the language of politics has now been reduced to the five second grab; the snappy one liner that pushes the buttons and draws a response is what the pollsters – and ultimately the ballot box - can measure. But at a time when the people of this country are better educated than ever before, when they are dealing with increasing complexity in every other aspect of their lives, why is our political discussion reduced to such a thin broth. Emotion and snappy one-liners are no substitute for logic or complexity in policy making and public debate.

It is not my place to advise either the media or the parliament about how to go about changing this situation – I can simply note what I observe from a somewhat privileged vantage point. I suspect that the pressures on the media will see some swings in the pendulum and innovations which manage to break through the stranglehold of media management, and I note with interest the discussion about the reform of parliamentary practices.

I would however like to add a suggestion, which may be of value to both. It is not a new idea, but it seems to me that it may be one whose time has come. An innovation that may go someway towards providing a framework for public policy discussion would be the televising of parliament, and related public affairs events – committees, media conferences, speeches etc. I know that this is something which has been considered by joint committees in the past, and has never really got beyond a discussion of the technicalities, legal issues and in debate cheap political point scoring. Indeed just as I listed the process of deliberation about the development of the fourth estate, a similar, although not quite so lengthy list can be cited documenting the debate about the televising of parliament in Australia. The first report was prepared in 1978, there is no record of any response to that, the second was an unfinished report in 1984, then there was another in '85 also with no response and then a further four the last in 1995 which also failed to draw a response from the government of the day.

So while the debate about the televising of parliament has been around for a long time, and has had some advocates, it has never really been taken seriously. I think that it should now be reconsidered. The technology has changed, the spectrum is available, the methods of televising the proceedings are now well established, the need for citizens and audiences to get access to more than the 5 second grab is greater as the space available for reports has shrunk, the expectation that cameras can relay events any where any time is well established in all other sectors of society, we live in a visual virtual reality. Television can supplement what Hansard already does. This could have interesting consequences as interest in direct democracy via the media is an idea that is likely to recur over the next decade.

It seems to me that that televising of parliament is no longer just an issue for the elected members and senators, it is essential for the health of the country as a whole. As the eminent American journalism critic Walter Lippmann wrote, "The press is no substitute for institutions, at best it shines a search light

and clarifies some events." Lippmann had learnt the limits of journalism as a public relations officer, managing public opinion and political communication during the First World War. The management of public opinion is now incomparably more sophisticated.

The media in this country does a good job – but it necessarily operates within limits. A television echo chamber may be an institutional response that complements the practical limitations of the media search light.

I don't want to be too overblown in this, but as the pressure on the media increases the space for detail is lost. The heirs and successors to Walter Lippmann, today's media managers know this in their bones. Increasingly what they seek to do is manage the frame through which issues are seen as well as the particulars of the event itself. This is now done with much greater skill than would have once been possible. Public debate in Australia is robust, at times even bullying, genuine alternatives; complexity and subtlety rarely get an airing. The opportunities to watch extended verbatim coverage would demonstrate the limits of this style and provide an easy point of access to the insights from the parliamentary debate and other significant public speeches.

I can hear the sceptics already: Why bother? Who'd watch? How boring? What a waste of money? Isn't that what the public broadcasters should do? Who would fund it?

It is interesting to look to other countries in this regard. The televising of parliament is done in many. As the technology of digital broadcasting, cable and satellite television, broadband internet removes scarcity of spectrum as a bottle neck, the technological impediments will disappear. Those of you who work in this building already have this access both to the coverage of the house and senate, and the committees. Why not make it available to those beyond Capital Hill?

The C-Span – cable and satellite public affairs network - in the USA is the best documented, and provides a particularly useful model. It was set up by Barry Lamb in 1979, a year after this parliament first considered televising its sittings. Lamb was a former journalist and Republican congressional aide, an assistant director in the office of telecommunications policy in the Nixon White

House who had become increasingly annoyed with the way that partial coverage distorted events. He recognised that the technology of cable and satellite television, the hunger for channels, and the desire by the cable industry to be seen to be exercising its quasi institutional role in covering public affairs, presented an opportunity. His vision was of a television network that had the time to show the debate, the speech, the news conference in full – gavel to gavel. It was not flashy, but by making the full debate, the full news conference, and the full speech, available it provide a base line for access to information about public affairs.

I'm sure that many of you have had the experience of seeing remarks and comments you have made broadcast, but feeling that without their context the meaning was lost or distorted. I am not critical of journalists in this, their difficult task is to reduce and distil, to draw out the most salient points and hopefully arrive at a snapshot that captures the essence of the debate, within tolerable bounds of accuracy. But sometimes the context is lost; and you need the underpinning arguments to make sense of the conclusions. Most often the distortion that occurs is not of the type described by Anthony Trollope in The Warden in 1855 "that makes you odious to your dearest friends to be pointed at by finger", but sometimes it is. Televising Parliament wouldn't prevent this, but Members, Senators and speech writers, would at least be able to take some comfort from the knowledge that some people saw the whole speech and had at least a chance of understanding what you were really saying.

C-span now operates two television networks covering the Congress and the Senate, committees, media conferences, speeches, and conferences and three radio networks. It is reached by 77 million of the 98 million American TV households, up from 3.5 million in 1979. While 60 percent never or rarely watch the network, 30 percent watch occasionally and ten percent watch regularly several times a week – a committed audience of more than 23 million. This is in a country where only about 45 percent of people still watch the network news shows. These figures, if translated to Australian cable television could mean that eight percent of Australian TV households could be expected to watch the network at least occasionally - more if it was available by free to air television. I haven't seen the ratings for the pay TV channels for a while, but I suspect that this would be in the middle ranking channels. This is not expensive television – the costs of production would be low, programming costs would be negligible, staff numbers small.

For reasons I do not quite understand at the moment in Australia the debate and discussion of ideas rarely makes it onto the mainstream agenda. The ideologically driven think tanks pump out their analysis with admirable frequency, the talk shows analyse the event, people get a chance to put in their two bob's worth on numerous radio programs, the op ed pages are filled with 800 word perspectives, large numbers of people are going to public lectures – yet the gap between this and the surface layer of political discussion is substantial.

Televising parliament and significant public events will not be a one stop solution to closing this gap, but it may be a part of it. If the public had the opportunity to watch a full debate, not just the grabs that appear on the nightly news some of the complexity of issues - the trade offs and necessary compromises - may become clearer to more people.

I don't think that this is just a minority concern, but even if it were the opinion leading and informed minority of any society is enormously important, just as the ideas that withstand robust debate are the ones that will form the basis of the institutions of the future. Again looking briefly at the C-span audience gives some clues to the depth of interest in public affairs. As you would expect the C-Span audience tends to be made up of people who vote and read newspapers. But interestingly a third of them are under 35, a third also only went to high school and about a third earn less than $30 000 a year. So it is not just something watched by the wealthy political elites – it may be that televising the Monica hearings helped this along a bit.

Having easy access to important public affairs debates would however put an information floor under the debate. It can give people ready access to more information than they would otherwise have – without the overlay of interpretation by commentators or the selection of editors. There are plenty of opportunities for such interpretation, selection and analysis elsewhere.

While there are proposals being developed about ways to improve the public standing of the parliament and better bring it into the 21st century the televising of parliament might also be a useful additional innovation. Concerns have been expressed in the past that the robustness of the debate may be diminished by televising the debate. Some have pointed to changes in the tone and nature of the

debates after radio broadcasts began in 1946, and that the deliberative nature of the Australian parliament could be impeded by such openness. Similar arguments were used to restrict press coverage in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It may be that the knowledge that an audience of electors is watching, might change the tone and nature of the debates for the better.

Live coverage could also provide an interesting platform for feedback. Again drawing on the C-Span figures shows how this might develop: 86 percent of politicians report significant increases in correspondence after they appear on the network, 91 percent consider this to be a good thing, 63 percent believe it has enhanced the reputation of congress and only 6 percent feel it has been harmed. C-span has also developed sophisticated feedback mechanisms, to provide direct responses. While this sort of talkback television has become well established in America it has not really taken off this country. Certainly with the introduction of digital broadcasting the capacity for the audience to respond, answer back, vote or whatever will be alluring and technologically easy. Tying audience response to a direct parliamentary channel is obviously quite a different proposition to the current style of radio talk back or internet polling based on an often selective or partial description of the issues.

Walter Lippmann anticipated the tyranny of opinion when he wrote that democracy could only work if we "could escape the intolerable and unworkable fiction that everyone must acquire a competent opinion about every issue" because no society could be effectively "governed by the episodes, incidents and eruptions elevated by journalism". If any of you saw the Alain de Botton program on the mismatch between the Socratic Method and the current tyranny of opinion polling and media management, you may have some sympathy for Lippmann's observation, which sounds dangerously elitist to our ears.

Of course today everyone is expected, and feels entitled, to have an opinion, even if they sometimes have precious little information on which to base it. The media tries to address this, but there is a danger is of the garbage in garbage out variety. So when NSW Chief Justice Jim Spigelman indirectly criticised the tyranny of talkback and the pressure ill informed commentary was placing on the

judiciary, leading talk back hosts were quick to respond. They were providing the feedback, the judges were there to do the public's bidding and respond to community pressure.

So the tension between "the mob" and established institutional practice is sharp. There is an expectation that people can have an input, provide feedback. I welcome this development. But for it to be meaningful there is a need for space to be created to allow for greater complexity, for the detail to be fleshed out, for the arguments to be tested. I am not saying that the media can't do this. Of course it can and does. But its ability to do so will always be limited by the space and time available, by the tolerable limits of mass audience interest, by the very episodic nature of journalism. This is why I suggest that the televising of parliament is an idea whose time may at last have arrived.

This could be done in a number of ways. It could use one of the digital broadcasting's datacasting content licenses – when this regime is finally resolved in a way that makes sense for the industry and audiences. Pay TV would be another possibility – although this currently only reaches 20 percent of households. The straightened financial times in that industry may make it unlikely immediately, but not impossible, especially given the recent rulings on access, and the lobbying that the industry is engaging in to ensure that the conditions regulating the switch to digital reception are most favourable. Similarly the current internet streaming could be upgraded and expanded, but this reaches an ever smaller proportion of the community, and the jerkiness of the picture does not make it a particularly compelling experience. I do not think that it would be appropriate to require the ABC to broadcast parliament – the ABC is much more than the echo chamber of the parliament, it is an independent public broadcaster. It has already well developed plans for its digital channels, and has a lot on its plate with the new international service. I would also be fearful that if the ABC were required to broadcast parliament this could be used as a stick to turn the ABC into the government broadcasting corporation.

The proposal to broadcast parliament and related public affairs events is about extending the parliament, not just creating another TV channel.

More than forty years ago, the Cambridge academic and writer, C.P Snow delivered a speech which left a legacy at least of a catchy phrase - two cultures. Sir Charles was exploring the gap between the literary and scientific establishments in post war Britain when the scientists were on the ascendancy and the writers were somewhat left out. These days the tables have probably turned. He bemoaned the literary ignorance and political radicalism of the scientists, the scientific ignorance of the writers and system of education which meant that neither group could talk to each other – even at a Cambridge High Tea.

The speech caused uproar in the way that it addressed a very particular British situation. In giving this speech a title I borrowed the phrase today because I think that there are elements of a two cultures in the gap in understanding of politicians and the media in Australia today. The two cultures are flip sides of the same coin – light and shade, relief and impression – but with important differences of role, method and accountability which need to be recognised and a distance maintained – which is why the media regulation debates are so problematic.

There are at least two different cultures at play – politicians are motivated to varying degrees by ideology and a desire to change or maintain institutions; journalists are generally not ideological and are not in most cases seeking to influence change; media companies enjoy the power that their quasi institutional status gives them, but are resolutely commercial and driven by self interest. My suggestion of a public affairs television network should not step on any of these toes. Indeed it should add value to each point of the public policy information chain, and provide an institutional supplement to what is already done by the parliament, executive, judiciary and the bastard estate.

The openness and access to information that the media craves and expects is, notwithstanding the consequences of September 11, the trajectory on which we are placed. The internet, for all the negative hype last year, allows a degree of openness and exchange which was inconceivable even ten years ago. The breaking down of information barriers, the synthesizing of material, the capacity for direct feedback are on a collision course with those who are seeking to manage, massage and strangle debate.

September 11 may have slowed this trend somewhat, but openness and access to information is absolutely the single brilliant idea of the networked information society. It is the 21st century manifestation of the Enlightment's ideals. We need to find means of saving our institutions from themselves, by using the technology and tools we now have at our disposal to build on the legacy of past debates and insights.