

## PIRANHAS IN THE PARLIAMENT

A Senate Occasional Lecture

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I have never been to South America and I haven't seen a piranha .. as it were... in the flesh.

A friend of mine, here in Canberra, does, however, have a stuffed one on top of her toilet.

It's about the size of your clenched fist - a taxidermy masterpiece with the most horrendously enormous teeth – and it sort of smiles at you like it might launch itself at your jugular as soon as you've turned your back and dropped your knickers.

The experience must be even more disconcerting for those whose ablutions require them to look it in the eye. It is one scary fish.

Portraying journalists as piranhas is, I admit, a bit of a cliché.

But the fishbowl analogy seemed too hard to go past when the good people of the Senate asked me to offer some thoughts on the strange parliamentary co-existence of the pollies with the Press.

I will, of course, be conceding that one of these two species is voracious, flesh-eating and insatiable - yes, that's us - and the other, traditionally (to pursue the analogy) its prey.

But I'll also point out that in this particular fish tank, the hunted have developed ways to dramatically minimise the risk of being eaten.

It's a bigger tank than it used to be and they have more room to hide but that's not all that's behind it.

By hand-feeding, over-feeding and selective starvation rations, they've managed to tame our aggressive instincts, limit our breeding grounds and significantly reduce our habitat. Without some effort to fight back, our traditional role may become endangered, if not extinct.

## The Fish With The Bad Press

As I said, the piranha tag isn't new. It's a favourite descriptor of those who don't like us all that much.

Having led with my chin on the title of this lecture, I went searching for some background on piranhas using that trusty tool so beloved of a journalist with a long speech to write and a looming deadline – Google.

I found a blogger who goes by the name of Joey Skaggs (1) and who's published some very amusing guidelines for baiting, catching and "cooking" journalists. He compares us to sharks, barracuda and, yes, piranhas.

"They are extremely territorial and defensive," he advises, "and will repeatedly attack, either singly or in large groups. You can usually find them behind hidden agendas."

He outlines a series of recommended hooks and lures – sex, controversy, incompetence, power, revenge, little guy against the system, anything with an animal or a child.

He also lists useful tools for reeling in a journalist – conviction and purpose, irony, humour, wit, confidentiality, deception

"Be patient," he urges the would-be angler. "Once the hook is set, they usually jump in the boat. And believe it or not, many others simply follow suit. Often feeding frenzies occur and you might even catch more than you can handle."

He suggests that, once caught though, journalists puff up. And should be iced quickly.

It seems real piranhas are actually... apparently... a popular food fish. (Who knew?) Even more fascinating, a piranha caught on a hook and line may be attacked by the others. Turning on your own kind. Imagine that.

And while it's commonly known that piranhas are found in the Amazonian, Guianas and Paraguayan river systems, I was delighted, a bit appalled and really not all that surprised to discover they have also been found swimming in the Potomac River in

Washington DC. Apparently they don't do so well there in the winter. (2)

Anyway, who would've thought there'd be such a cheap link from piranhas to politics, just waiting for me to shamelessly exploit it?

In this national capital and this particular fish tank, some argue that parliamentarians and the media should be separated, at least by glass, to avoid one being eaten alive by the other.

I guess that's understandable.

We in the media can be vicious. When we smell blood, we circle and we strike. Sometimes the more merciless among us enjoy taking a single, debilitating bite to leave the victim swimming in circles, missing a fin. Other times, in a feeding frenzy, there can be little more than a carcass left.

We're not all piranhas of course. Some of us are Parrotfish. Blowfish. Goldfish. Silverfish.

But as far as reputation goes, we all tend to be caught in the same net.

After all, it only takes the suggestion of sharp fins or gigantic teeth to make people want to get out of the water.

### Predator and Prey

In politics, the feeding goes in both directions. Journalists pursue politicians. And politicians pursue coverage. And when they don't like the coverage, they pursue journalists.

At last week's church service to mark the opening of Parliament for a new year, Anglican Bishop Tom Frame was clear about who he believed was the predator and who was the prey. (3)

His remarks were *to* the politicians and *about* those of us who deal most publicly with them.

"Very few care or have any regard for your feelings of those of your families, who are often deeply wounded by the arrows that are hurled at you," the Bishop said.

“So please don’t say ‘oh, it comes with the job’ as though by saying that, it absolves the people, it absolves the *Press*, from such appalling behaviour. We can do better. We ought to do better. You deserve better,” he told them.

But there was a second message too.

“There are some things that we cannot demand from others,” the bishop said. “Respect readily comes to mind. It’s not gained through persuasion, intimidation or coercion. Respect can only be earned.”

He was right, on both fronts.

Some of us in the media can be terribly cruel, occasionally oblivious to the hurt we cause in pursuit of a good story or just a good line. That is as true in political journalism as any other kind and probably more so.

But at least as often, in this part of the pond, we can find ourselves in receipt of some heavy-handed persuasion, intimidation and - if not quite coercion - then trickery at least.

Bishop Frame didn’t seek to excuse either set of behaviour. And I certainly don’t suggest that being on the receiving end of one justifies resorting to the other.

### Who’s Devouring Whom?

But between the Press and politicians – and on politicians I’ll speak mostly here of governments because governments have the most political power – it would be wrong to suggest only *one* is doing the devouring.

Despite how we’re sometimes portrayed, journalists don’t spend their days looking for new ways to destroy the careers of the nation’s elected representatives.

We are frequently, perhaps even mostly, legitimately pursuing stories that are in the public interest, though sometimes there are differences of opinion on how “public interest” should be defined.

These stories can occasionally cause considerable discomfort to those who feature in them. We can find that we thwart political ambition, stymie a promotion, or obstruct someone on a path of least resistance. And then we meet considerable resistance in return.

As tools to be used against pesky journalists, persuasion, intimidation and trickery have been around for years.

Many of my colleagues recount colourful tales of abusive phone calls, withdrawn access, threats of future non-cooperation and punishment for perceived bad behaviour. They mostly laugh about it later. Mostly.

When former Labor minister Ros Kelly's resignation was rumoured, her colleague Graham Richardson tried to shut down the speculation, launching one of those routine, all-out assaults on those who reported it, ridiculing them for writing rubbish worthy of nothing but fish-wrapping. Of course shortly thereafter, Kelly did resign and then, suddenly, so did Richardson. As a parting gift, a couple of journalists gave Richardson a dead fish wrapped in copies of their newspaper. He bellowed with laughter and called it the "perfect Mafia present".

Politicians also regularly use the media to get at each *other*. One senator, now retired, used to enjoy leaking provocative anonymous quotes to newspapers, deliberately using *another* colleague's recognisable turn of phrase.

And two members of the current Opposition front bench, watching a colleague doing a terribly serious Lateline interview on the ABC, spotted the telltale outline of his ever-present mobile phone in his top pocket. They fell about laughing in an office downstairs, watching him fumbling onscreen as they rang it. Twice.

But the relationships are not always quite so jolly.

In 1990-91, the leadership rivalry between Bob Hawke and Paul Keating split the Press Gallery, as each man enlisted commentators and columnists to his cause.

On the night Hawke finally lost to his rival, he threw open the doors of the Cabinet room and put on a huge party. But any journalist he

saw as having sided with Keating was barred. There were stand-up rows at the door and almost fisticuffs as Hawke's defenders squared off against those they blamed for his defeat.

Some of us weren't tarred with either the Hawke *or* Keating brush – probably because we were too young and irrelevant – and we wandered right through the Cabinet suite, drinks in hand, looking in every cupboard drawer and swinging on every chair. ASIO must've been in there for weeks afterwards.

There *are* occasionally moments of strange solidarity, like September 11 2001, when John Howard and the travelling media were all caught up in the terrorist attacks in Washington. On the lawns of the ambassador's residence the following day, as he prepared to fly out of the country in specially-opened airspace on the Vice President's plane, Howard asked that the cameras be turned off and then apologised for leaving us all behind. We told him we had work to do.

So there is a sort of mutual understanding that develops if you hang around here too long. Elsewhere, I think they call it 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

But often in the relationship, it's us using them and them using us with the blowtorches applied in both directions.

When Paul Keating was Prime Minister, he famously went after The West Australian newspaper because of a highly critical story it published about him. The revenge and ostracisation went on for years.

There are rare occasions, of course, when the politician IS on solid ground.

Some 20 or so years ago, when I was working at The Canberra Times a national debate was raging about tax and, specifically, the then Treasurer Keating's personal arrangements.

Some newspaper executive in his wisdom had decided it would be fun to publish photographs of Keating's residences in both Sydney and Canberra, complete with their full street addresses.

I got to the office very early that morning and the only other person on the editorial floor was colleague Graham Downie, affectionately known as the God reporter. It was so early, neither of us had even read the paper yet, though Graham had a better excuse than me because Graham is blind.

He also has a very black sense of humour and had, back then, a very small windowless office in the same wing as the editorial executives. So when the editor's phone rang, he got there first. He was slightly puzzled when a torrent of abuse spewed into his ear and he politely asked who was calling.

It was Paul (expletive deleted) Keating, who explained in straightforward terms that he was really quite upset about the houses and the addresses and who did we think we were etc. All, as you can imagine, punctuated in a most animated four-letter fashion.

Still trying to decipher it all, Graham said "I'm sorry but I don't know what you're talking about."

Keating went into an apoplectic rage that someone who worked for a newspaper had not even seen its front page. "What *are* you... *BLIND?*"

I still remember the smile that came across Graham's face.

"Actually," he said, (and he really enjoyed the pause) I am."

The *Treasurer* only paused for a moment and then the abuse resumed.

### Tending the Tank and Taming the Wildlife

Perhaps it's an even greater sense of past media persecution that's inspired the leader of the current Government to bite back on a much greater scale and harness the volatile power of the circling media.

Over the past 11 years, the Prime Minister has learned to control media coverage like none before him have. He knows how to minimise the risk of the uncontrollable feeding frenzy. He knows when we're hungry – in these days of the 24 hour news cycle, that's all the time - and either feeds us, starves us into submission or just slowly raises the water temperature till we start to roll over.

I would suggest that history will record the ‘control of the bowl’, if I may continue to torture the analogy, as absolutely central to John Howard’s success.

This Government’s media management strategy has flourished through a combination of restriction and distraction.

Restriction is hardly new. The previous Government certainly engaged in it too, though not as effectively as its successor.

Under Labor, the application of the Freedom of Information Act became increasingly subjective, with journalists’ requests routinely finding their way onto ministers’ desks for political scrutiny before approval. Or denial.

The monitoring and, by extension, control of information was alive and well under then too, in the guise of a unit we used to call aNiMaLS.

‘aNiMaLS’ was officially called the National Media Liaison Service, which laboured under an awkward acronym until it was rescued by a few cheeky vowels.

It was squeezed into an L-shaped set of offices just downstairs from here.. around the corner from the Prime Minister’s suite.

Its rather un-subtle location on one of the building’s main thoroughfares was offset by frosted windows and a lack of obvious signage, giving it the slightly mysterious air of a spy agency hard at work.

aNiMaLS’ ‘liaising’ involved monitoring media all over Australia and disseminating useful snippets to embarrass or nobble the Opposition.

If an Opposition figure made a hash of something, somewhere, they had it covered. If a partial transcript from Radio Gunnedah appeared on your desk, you knew it was aNiMaLS – and your taxes - at work.

The coalition – much monitored and, by 1996, very cranky - abolished aNiMaLS upon winning office.



In its place has grown a much MORE sophisticated network without the snazzy acronym. It's a sort of media-monitoring-cum-spin set-up.

The monitoring is once again paid from the public purse and you can bet the bill is off the charts compared with those old days. But it's now accepted as a necessary expense in these days of 24-hour news.

In terms of outward information flow, it's the Prime Minister's press office that's ultimately in charge.

Announcements are centrally coordinated to ensure no conflicting messages or wasted media opportunities. Ministers are assigned to appear on Sunday morning talk shows to reinforce a theme... and ordered to cancel if plans change.

On the wider media stage, it's the ministerial committee on government communications - comprised.. not surprisingly... of Government MPs - which has the oversight role, vetting and approving all Government advertising and national media campaigns.

Access to people and events is increasingly restricted, often attributed to "security" but sometimes looking suspiciously like convenience or playing favourites.

Despite the lip-service paid to press freedom, information control is pretty tight.

Some journalists and organisations are deemed useful and given extra assistance while others are designated as either being of no benefit, because of low circulation or ratings, or just being 'trouble'. That's a practice that's gone on for decades but it has been greatly refined under the current regime.

There's restriction on our questioning these days too.

When heads of government visit from abroad, the Prime Minister insists on taking only two questions from each country's media – a trick he picked up in Washington.

And we are increasingly in the age of the “video news release” – the advent of which causes heated discussion along the Press Gallery corridor.

Where the Prime Minister is concerned, these emerge in response to a particular event – the death of Slim Dusty, a sporting hero’s retirement, a triumph on Oscar night.

Sometimes the comment is on request from television bureaux, sometimes it’s on offer.

The Prime Minister’s office will agree to do a pooled “interview”, usually with a single television journalist - sometimes also one from radio - but restricted to the specified subject. Occasionally there’s only a camera present and very occasionally the press secretary even conducts the “interview”.

The broadcast material is then distributed to all television and radio networks and the transcript to all print media and wire services.

It means we get a “grab”, as we call it, on one particular issue which we otherwise wouldn’t have. But it also means the Prime Minister avoids talking about anything else, that particular day.

His office argues he often doesn’t have time to do an “all-in” news conference all the time – and to be fair, he does do them regularly - canvassing all the day’s issues with all the media together. And, they say, at least this way we get something.

It’s not an entirely unreasonable point.

But neither is the suggestion that this way, he gets to “cherry pick” the issues he wants to confront and sidestep others on difficult days.

So should we run these comments or not? It’s a dilemma. And we usually do.

### Putting The Lid On

The policies of restriction also affect who we’re allowed to speak to – or rather who’s allowed to speak to us.

Since it won office, the Government has shut off or curtailed many traditional information sources for journalists.

The large-scale background briefings on weekly coalition party meetings have been restructured.

The affable, sometimes overly helpful backbench briefers have been replaced by savvier senior MPs whose own “brief” is to only offer a selective picture of what went on. The Opposition has adopted the same approach. The spin can make you dizzy.

And the Government’s been particularly tough with public servants. Few are even allowed to speak to journalists anymore and those the Government suspects of doing so without authorisation are pursued, even prosecuted.

So, too, are the journalists to whom they speak – witness the case of my two colleagues Michael Harvey and Gerard McManus from News Ltd’s Herald Sun. (4)

They wrote a story on the Government’s relationship with war veterans and how despite its publicly sympathetic attitude, it was rejecting their request for financial assistance and then trying to spin what was on offer as generous.

McManus and Harvey have now been charged with contempt of court for refusing to reveal their sources. They have pleaded guilty. It’s not clear if they’ll be jailed, although the judge did indicate some hostility when he remarked recently that the journalists seemed to wear their refusal to obey the demand to disclose as a ‘badge of honour’. I’m not sure how much protection a badge of honour would offer inside. But I strongly support the non-disclosure.

Some may think it’s fair enough to jail journalists for refusing to spill.

But what gets me in the gills is that senior members of government routinely offer journalists strategic “leaks”, sometimes as a kite-flying exercise to test the response to a proposed piece of policy, sometimes for other reasons.

They do so in the full knowledge that the journalists, in upholding the vital confidentiality clause in our code of ethics, will not expose them as the source.

So it's a bit breathtaking when someone *else* tells us something – something the Government doesn't want published – and we are hauled before a court for refusing to divulge *them* as the source, in order for them to be prosecuted.

I concede that this “by agreement” arrangement in source protection can itself be a source of frustration for - and criticism by - those *consuming* the news because vital pieces of context will be missing - like who provided the information and why,.

But without the protection of sources under the code of ethics, you'd know a lot less about the workings of government, even than you do now. So it's a trade-off.

These days, it's a lot harder to find sources without a party-political agenda who *are* willing to talk.

Whereas we used to seek information from specialist bureaucrats on the execution of a particular facet of policy, we are now routinely directed to the “minister's office”.

That's because there is nothing, now, that isn't political. Everything done by government, is done with the politics in mind.

So restriction also comes in the shape of spin.

Just like the role of political journalism is, increasingly, to interpret events, it's important to see how the Government – and, slowly, the Opposition – is setting the context for their announcements for maximum PR impact.

Take the Government's new \$10 billion water plan. A bit of grilling through the Senate estimates committee process this week has now established that it didn't go to Cabinet for approval before Mr Howard unveiled it with fanfare in his pre-Australia Day speech.

What that tells you is that somebody decided that the *timing* of the announcement - and its potential political impact - was more

important than bedding down the details through the usual processes.

And it's not just *when* but *how* things are announced that's significant.

In her recent dissection of the Press Gallery (5), Queensland academic Helen Ester writes about Mr Howard having chosen to announce his decision to go to war in Iraq at a news conference, rather than on the floor of Parliament as would once have been the case.

She quotes my colleague Rob Chalmers, who produces the 'Inside Canberra' newsletter and is now the longest-serving Press Gallery member with 50 years' service under his belt.

Rob sums up the Government's PR priorities when he describes Parliament House as increasingly like Mr Howard's "taxpayer-funded television studio".

Actually 'radio studio' might have been even more accurate.

More than any other political leader, John Howard has harnessed the power of talkback radio as a means of communicating over the heads of the local piranhas and straight into a much bigger and, as he sees it, less filtered pond.

He has a weekly commitment to each of the main big-city morning radio shows and allowing a TV camera to witness his responses, and then issuing a transcript, ensures other media also regurgitate what he has to say.

It has worked extremely well for him and is now so entrenched it's a practice which may well continue beyond this government.

### Dangling The Bait

But along with all this restriction comes the artful practice of distraction. We fall for it every time.

While limiting the flow of *some* information, the Government is a veritable font on other things, ensuring we always have something to write and broadcast – recognising the eternal appetite of the very hungry fish.

It's forever announcing things, or re-announcing, or re-packaging them.

Keeping us occupied is a key objective. The busier we are tearing something apart, the less likely we are to start doing laps, looking for something else to munch.

So why do we put up with this?

Well, the trouble is, a lot of what the Government is 'announcing' *is* actually news.

It's become very good at *manufacturing* news, at stashing things away in the bottom drawer to be unveiled with a grand 'ta-DA' on a day when a good, solid distraction is required.

The choice for us is either go with the big, obvious story – the \$10 billion water plan or the discussion paper on values in education - or ignore it (*and every other* news outlet) and go trawling for something they *don't* want us to know about.

It's very hard to choose to ignore actual events - even if they are sometimes confected - in favour of chasing shadows, though the most important stories are often hiding in the weed.

I think we should all probably spend a little more time in the weed and less time gulping on the surface.

But.. that takes a lot of effort. It takes time management – always a personal challenge for me. It takes determination not to be distracted by the electronic snowstorm of emailed press releases and the insistent parade of ministers and shadow ministers wanting to spruik their wares.

And it takes resources – the backing of publishers and broadcasters willing to invest the time and space in having us look for the *real* news instead of being dependent creatures who need feeding daily and are told what we should eat.

Like pet piranhas who've actually forgotten how to bite.

In conclusion, I think there *is* more good about us all living here together than bad. But vigilance is required on *our* part – the part

of those of us in the media - to ensure we're still doing what we're here for and not just acting as the bullhorns of government and opposition.

My research into real piranhas tells me they *can*, in fact, survive as pets.

But they actually do need a varied diet. And though they seem to have an endless appetite, overfeeding – like underfeeding - will kill them.

(After this, I may go hungry for some time.)

Thank you.

## FOOTNOTES

(1) 'A Well Cooked Journalist', Joey Skaggs. June 21, 2003.  
[www.joeyskaggs.com](http://www.joeyskaggs.com)

(2) 'In River of Many Aliens, Snakehead Looms As Threat'. May 29, 2005. The Washington Post.

(3) Sermon, Church service marking the opening of Parliament. Anglican Bishop Tom Frame. St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. February 6, 2007.

(4) 'Cabinet's \$500m rebuff revealed'. Gerard McManus & Michael Harvey. Herald Sun, February 20, 2004.

(5) 'The Media', Helen Ester, Central Queensland University, 2006. Published in 'Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate'. Allen & Unwin. February, 2007.