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***On Being a Political  
Reporter***

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*Reported by Parliamentary Reporting Staff*

**Prof. REYNOLDS:** Peter is one of the doyens of the political commentating world in the media. He is an author as well as a journalist. He has an economics degree and an arts degree from the University of Queensland. He started as a public servant in the Department of Industrial Development, which was very much - as he says in the book and as attested to by others, including my biography of Mike Ahern - a cinderella department in a state where everything was directed towards primary industry or mining and then later tourism. People who were in Peter's area were seeing the world through quite different eyes, trying to move Queensland to a different economic and political economy plateau. This did not altogether happen, but Peter from that time had honed an alternative view of Queensland's society and how it might go and how the future might develop. With Mike Ahern in the late 1980s and now with Peter Beattie in the late 1990s and early 21st century, we are into IT, the Smart State and so on as another way of trying to break the cycle of dependency on a tripartite economy, which may not be the appropriate way to go for the future.

However, I have asked Peter if he would simply talk to the theme of being a political commentator, which essentially means, I hope, that Peter will talk a good deal about himself and his own career and his experiences, which I think will be very interesting for all of us and, I hope, amusing at times and enlightening. Peter, thank you very much for coming.

**Mr CHARLTON:** I first met Dr Reynolds as an undergraduate 30 years ago this year when I was a student in Australian Political Institutions, which was a first year politics subject. In the lecture on the media, Paul said something to the effect that the Brisbane *Telegraph*, as it then was, did not have a correspondent in Canberra and I shouted from the back, 'Yes, it does,' thus proving that I was rude, and nothing much has changed.

Earlier, Paul mentioned *State of Mind*, which was published in 1983, just in time for the Liberal Party's walkout of the coalition - heady times. It sold reasonably well and it was published again 1987 - not so well this time, because I was trying to update it as the Joh for PM push was on and it was changing day by day. So if you ever see a copy of the second edition of *State of Mind* - it is rather larger than the little green one - buy because it might be worth a bob or two one day. Earlier, when Paul mentioned it, I was reminded of a former colleague of his and a friend of mine, the late Margaret Cribb, who took me to task for *State of Mind* because it did not have an index. I am pleased to see that students are still using it, index or no index.

I am going to talk to you tonight about my experiences as a political writer, editor - whatever - but basically, from a federal perspective. I do not feel qualified to speak about Queensland politics anymore. I left this state in 1992 and I was in Canberra for the entire period of Keating's prime ministership. At the risk of blowing my own trumpet, I was one of only three members of the press gallery to predict a Keating win in 1993, and I was among a number who had egg on their faces in 1996. It was an extraordinary period. I do not think that Keating has been yet recognised for the changes that he brought to Australian politics. There has been a fair bit of selective rewriting of history, now celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Hawke government, but I was reminded last week at the launch of Dick Woolcott's book on diplomacy - Woolcott a former head of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador to Indonesia - of just how different the approaches were from those taken by the Keating government towards Asia and towards our region and those being taken by the current government. I make no other observation than I think that, by and large, Keating got it right and, by and large, I think this present lot have got it badly wrong.

There is one precept I live by as a journalist, and that is the dicta prescribed by the famous American journalist I.F. Stone who ran a newsletter, and that is: all governments are run by liars and no-one should believe a word they say. The second thing - as almost a corollary of that - when dealing with a politician, ask yourself the simple question: why is this lying son of a bitch lying to me? Excessively cynical, I know, but it is a view that I think by and large works.

Recently, at a news conference that I attended thanks to the marvels of telephone, I happened to mention the Gulf of Ton Kin resolution and there was stunned silence around the editorial table. I think that I was the only person who has able to describe what the Gulf of Ton Kin resolution was. Forty years ago next year, the Johnson administration lied to Congress, lied to the American people, and lied to the world by saying that North Vietnamese gunboats had attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Ton Kin. As a result of that lie, Congress voted. There were no dissenters in the Lower House and only two dissenters in the Senate. There was no

attack. The initial reports came because of inexperienced sonar operators and poor weather conditions. But the Johnson administration basically fabricated the reasons for Congress to vote as it did and that resolution, of course, authorised the use of American ground troops in Vietnam. There is a wall in the mall in Washington, which I urge everyone to go and see when they are there, with 60,000 American names engraved on that wall. Sixty thousand US dead, 500 and something Australian dead, God knows how many million Vietnamese dead as a result of that lie. That was another Texan president. So it is a worthwhile view to remind yourself every day that governments are, in fact, run by liars and in this country it takes 30 years for the lies to come out.

For the past 30-odd years I have spent covering politics, it has been a roller coaster of a ride, firstly here in this state, working in this very building, sitting out there with one of the earliest spin doctors, Allan Callaghan, drinking very cheap port all afternoon in the days of the Brisbane *Telegraph*. But those years pale into insignificance by comparison to the years in Canberra and the years since, because the issues are so much greater at a federal level.

I think one of the reasons that state Labor governments keep being re elected - and I would like to be a cert in winning Lotto tonight that Carr will be re elected on Saturday - is that, by and large, the issues at state level are settled and it is about management and managing portfolios that are close to people. The issues at the federal level are not settled. There is now in this country clear division about the prospect of war with Iraq. I think that it would be exercising the minds of the members of cabinet as they meet tonight that for the first time in our history we are going to commit young men and young women to a war that does not have popular support at home. It has a direct impact on the way that political reporters, political commentators and political editors report this particular issue.

Paul asked earlier whether there was any support for the war among my colleagues in Canberra. I cannot think of any, apart from the usual suspects like the Piers Akermans - if you do not read the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* you are spared - some of the more extreme commentators like Greg Sheridan and others in the *Australian*. There is virtually no support for what the Howard government is doing among my colleagues in Canberra. For the very first time as a retired Infantry Lieutenant Colonel, I marched in a protest rally in Sydney last month wearing my RSL badge and I was not the only person wearing an RSL badge on parade that day. It is extraordinary that, as the Prime Minister thinks about going to war, he is doing so against the advice of half a dozen former defence chiefs and the current serving President of the RSL, Major General Peter Phillips. If it is good enough for Peter Phillips, it is good enough for me.

Coming back to the way this war is going to be reported, the young men and the young women we are sending to the Middle East will not have their exploits reported clearly, honestly and openly by any Australian journalist who is travelling with them. The Defence Department, no doubt on orders from the government, has applied the most rigorous conditions on the way that anyone reports from the Middle East. Any military person from the rank of lance corporal up can read a reporter's copy, vet it and change it. The Defence Department says that this is not censorship. Well, it sounds like it to me! The identities of the young men and young women have been protected. The official line is that it is for security. There are no such similar security provisions applying to the British or American newspapers. Again, it is an exercise in control coming out of the Defence Department via the government. As David Marr and Marion Wilkinson remind us in their splendid book on the *Tampa*, it worked for the Howard government before the 2001 election and they believe that it will work for them again.

What you see there is what a Canberra press gallery journalist goes through every day of the week. I used to walk out of Parliament House at 10 or 11 o'clock at night thinking, 'I've only scratched the surface of what's happened here today. I really have no idea of what has happened.' There are a couple of factors at work. One is that it is incredibly difficult to get past the spin doctors. It is easier to find out what happens in caucus or a Liberal Party room because you cultivate - everyone does - contacts. My colleague Wallace Brown had a wonderful contact in the caucus, Ben Humphries. They were great mates. Within about half an hour of the caucus meeting finishing, the direct line in Wal's office would ring and if he was not around we would pick it up and say, 'G'day, Ben.' But everyone does it and everyone has their contacts.

So it is easy enough to find out what is happening in the party room and what is happening in caucus. It is less easy - almost impossible in fact nowadays - to find out what is happening in the Public Service. Public servants have been politicised at the very highest level.

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There is no such thing as a permanent head anymore. They can be sacked, as the Paul Barrett case demonstrated, on the whim of a minister. One of the first things that the Howard government did when it came to office was to sack I think six public permanent heads or departmental secretaries, the most prominent of which was Mike Costello who later became Beazley's chief of staff. When the Labor Party returns to office it will sack permanent heads or departmental secretaries. The idea of an anonymous, independent, strong civil service simply no longer exists.

You will see, as Marr and Wilkinson demonstrate and as David Solomon and some other of my colleagues demonstrated in an earlier book, *Howard's Race*, that public servants are now providing to the politicians the advice that they want to hear. More importantly, they are not telling them of things that they do not want to hear, and the 'children overboard' case is a perfect example of that. The saddest aspect of that was that there were people in uniform, including the then Chief of the Defence Force, who knew what was going on and did not have the guts to say so either to their ministers or to the public. As someone who enjoyed his period in the Army, unusually, I find that sad and distressing.

The present government - and it is not all that much of a difference from the Keating government - rules by fear. John Howard has not appeared on *Meet the Press*, which is a Channel 10 political chat show, since Greg Turnbull, who was Paul Keating's press secretary and later Kim Beazley's press secretary, went to work for Channel 10 after the 2001 election. The view is in Howard's office that if Channel 10 is going to employ ex-Labor staffers Howard is not going to have anything to do with the program. When Paul Bongiorno, whom many of you will remember from his time here in Brisbane, rang the dreadful Tony O'Leary, Howard's chief press secretary, to complain about this, O'Leary threatened to pull off any other senior minister who might appear on the program - in effect, to deprive the program of talent on a weekly basis. Those people who appear on the Sunday morning chat shows - *Sunday, Sunrise, Insiders*, Oakes's *Sunday* segment and *Meet the Press* - are coordinated. When they are government ministers, they are coordinated out of the Prime Minister's office. They have a particular message that they want to get across and they will play favourites and put people on to Oakes because they know that Oakes has got a huge rating. Now they are more inclined to put people onto *Insiders* because *Insiders* is starting to take over. It is deliberate. It is not accidental the people you see there on a Sunday morning.

Recently - in fact, two weeks ago - Bongs rang me and said, 'We're trying for Downer. He's in Korea. I'd like you to do the show with Michelle Grattan.' I said, 'Yeah, fine.' That was the Tuesday. On the Friday he rang me and said, 'Mate, I'm embarrassed.' I said, 'What's the problem?' He said, 'Downer's office has just been on to me. Downer will not appear if you do the show.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'He took exception to something you wrote last year.' I thought it was an interesting piece. I just went through Peter Edwards's volume of the official history of the Vietnam War that has the call-up dates. People of my generation will remember that we were called up on the basis of our birth dates and the machine used to draw the dates was the same one that drew the New South Wales lottery prizes. It was the only lottery I ever won!

I went through and found the call-up dates and then I compared them with the birth dates of ministers in the Howard government. Lo and behold, Alexander Downer would have been called up but he was a student at a university overseas. Peter Reith would have been called up but he was at university when the ballot ended. Robert Hill would have been called up but he avoided the draft by going off to London University for a postgraduate degree. Kim Beazley was in fact called up but failed the medical. I rang him and he said, 'Mate, I had polio as a kid. I failed the medical.' Gareth would have been called up, but he was at Oxford. So I happened to point out that last time the draft was rather unfairly shared around. The people who got deferments were the middle class kids at university. Apparently Downer thought I had accused him of being a draft dodger and that was it. But that is the power that they wield and it was impossible for me to do the show. I simply had to say, 'Okay, Bongs, I'm off it. Find someone else.'

My place was taken by Brian Toohey who went into journalism after working as a research officer for the Queensland Labor Party on George Georges's staff. That is the kind of approach that this government is running. In their book, Marr and Wilkinson reflect that basically the way *Tampa* was reported was a failure of journalism in late 2001, and they are absolutely right. We were all guilty of not digging hard enough, of not asking the right questions, not persisting, not

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continuing. I suspect that it has become so difficult in Canberra that some people have already given up the task. I think that there is not the degree of supervision, the degree of examination and the degree of analysis being applied to politics now that there was, say, at the height of the Hawke-Keating government where the economic issues were important and people were examining them very intently.

I think the Canberra gallery has become largely complacent. I think a lot of people have been there far too long, although one of the people who has been there the longest - in fact, Laurie Oakes - is by far and away the best. I think the younger people have come to accept the degree of spin of manipulation of the news that is practised out of Howard's office and out of the other offices and accept it. I think, increasingly, young journalists are looking elsewhere for careers. The idea of someone spending 30 or 40 years in journalism seems to be disappearing. I am thinking of five people I worked with in the News Limited bureau - all bright young men, all university educated, all of whom went into public relations through Howard government ministers after 1996, none of whom are in journalism or PR at the moment. One is with a bank, one is with the Sydney Stock Exchange, and another is running his own consultancy business. The talent of people is being lost because the money is better and I do not think that they see the challenge there.

I have mentioned how tightly the news is controlled. The other problem is that newspapers are becoming less important, less relevant. The news cycle is set of a day and it is set very largely, particularly in Sydney, by the talkback jocks. You do not have that phenomenon in Brisbane or to the same extent in Melbourne, but in Sydney the most populous state, the political agenda is set by the talkback jocks, by Alan Jones and John Laws. It is worth while to go into the Howard government web site and have a look at the way that Howard every Friday does a separate interview with someone somewhere around the country, always from Southern Cross Broadcasting, which is 2UE, 3AW, 4BC. Every Friday morning, he is on that. That sets the agenda for the weekend and then that runs over the weekend. They will link to the Sunday papers, particularly the Sunday *Telegraph* which happens to be a favourite of the Howard government - something that they want to place - and then that will run throughout the week.

Television and to a lesser extent radio are the most important mediums. I will talk more about election campaigns in a moment. Television is the prime source, the prime vehicle for politicians to get their message across. Newspapers are less important. The sort of stuff that I, Grattan, Ramsey, Kelly and the rest of us do is read, I suspect, by an increasingly smaller and smaller percentage of the population. I think that the impact of a lot of what we do in terms of opinion pieces is being lessened. It is much more important to get on to Jones or to Laws or to get your message across on the 6 o'clock commercial news. I think in the long run that is quite dangerous.

Politicians understand how this news cycle works. They understand that it is important to get their message across in the simplest possible way. Neville Wran perfected it, Keating was very good at it, Howard is very good at it and that is speaking in grabs - speaking in phrases that can be edited down to 15, 20 seconds, but get the message across on the evening news. You will see this particularly during the election campaigns.

Once, election campaigns used to be fun. Now they are so tightly controlled, tightly organised, tightly run that they have become a bit of a farce. It really began with the 1993 campaign, but certainly by the time 1996 had come around the coalition decided that the only way they thought they would win - or the way that they knew they would win - was to roll themselves into the smallest possible ball, put out no policies until the very last minute, and when they did put them out, not allow any time for examination. That was an easy thing to do then, because the Keating government was so far on the nose, in Wayne Goss's phrase, people were sitting on verandas with baseball bats. But it became an incredibly difficult thing to cover.

I remember being at a wedding reception place somewhere in suburban Melbourne when Costello revealed the spending cuts that they would make to the budget to bring it back into surplus. The document ran to 40 pages: single spacing, A4; very, very densely argued; very, very complex. We got 10 minutes to read it. So sensible questioning was out of the equation. There was just no time to read it and to understand what was in it, and certainly no time to pick up a telephone and call someone from Treasury and say, 'Look, does it work?' That has been the way that this is been done ever since. There is no open scrutiny of policies. The Labor Party tried the

same thing last time. It sort of rolled itself into a small ball and said that it would have rollback, and it was quite clear from the May budget that the Howard government was not going to leave any money left over in the biscuit tin for Labor to use to roll back the GST.

I think that, as the great ideological issues have been settled, the parties have drifted closer and closer together. The differentiation between the two is now much more difficult to make so that political commentators and political reporters are then reduced to reporting the sizzle, not the sausage - reporting the ephemera almost of politics, which is why you will see constant stories about leadership speculation whether it is happening or not, because it is easier for people to write about leadership changes than it is to write about complex policy.

I do all of my reporting now from Sydney. It was a conscious decision of the *Courier-Mail* to move me up there after the 1996 election. Every newspaper now has a senior person writing about politics not in Canberra, because Canberra gives you a very, very narrow framework, a narrow arc. Tommy Burton is now an executive on the *Sydney Morning Herald*. SBS made a program about the 1996 election and Tom Burton, who was then political editor for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said, 'My job is to report what happens in three of the four corridors of this building' - meaning Parliament House - and by that he was saying that his job was to report what happened in the ministerial wing, in the Senate and in the House of Representatives. That is the problem for most people in the Canberra press gallery; they are locked away in that rather lovely building, which functionally is awful. They do not get to speak to the public servants. In any event, the public servants probably will not speak to them now. They do not get to report what is happening in a policy sense. All they are doing is reporting what is happening in party rooms, because that is the easy part. Occasionally Oakes will get a magnificent scoop, like the Shane Stone letter to Howard and another more recent one, the Andrew Wilkie resignation. Oakes gets them because, firstly, he is a very good journalist but, secondly, Nine is the top-rating news. If you want to have the maximum impact you go to Oakes and you go to Channel 9. You do not go to Jim Middleton at the ABC or Dennis Grant at SBS because they have fewer viewers. It is as simple as that. Oakes's scoops are legendary - an entire budget courtesy of John Howard when Howard was Malcolm Fraser's Treasurer. It is quite clear that Oakes's source for the Shane Stone letter and the more recent one - it has completely slipped my mind now -

**Prof. Reynolds:** Kernot.

**Mr CHARLTON:** No, Kernot came out of Beazley's office. It was Shane Stone himself. If the Liberal president writes to the Prime Minister and there are only two copies of that letter and the Prime Minister's office did not leak it, you have got to look somewhere else. That is where it was done. Scoops are few and far between now in Canberra. The days of people like Max Walsh, certainly in the *Fin Review*, Ian Fitchett before that on the *Herald*, Ramsay when he was writing for the *Australian*, and Ken Davidson when he was writing for the *Age*, of getting genuine scoops simply no longer happen; there is such tight control over the news, it is so manufactured and it is so well orchestrated. I think all of us, particularly people who buy newspapers and watch television, are being shortchanged as a result.

Canberra is a very, very insular place. If you live there long enough you start to believe that it matters. It does not matter very much. The politicians know that. Do not stand between a politician in the Canberra airport on a Friday afternoon. The place is deserted at weekends, certainly of politicians unless they are actually forced to stay there for a reason. The public servants are now no longer the major employers in Canberra, but it has still got that kind of small provincial insular feel about it. It is difficult to get sensible public policy in a city where self-government is not terribly popular and most people yearn for the days when they were on the tin of the taxpayer and the National Capital Development Commission. It has a government that to call it mickey-mouse is to give it a certain dignity that it does not possess. It is elected by a complex system. It is rather like the Schleswig-Holstein question; the only person who understood it went mad. It is, like the other territories, dependent on taxpayer money and it is probably the very worst place for a capital. It is one that we have been stuck with now for nearly 100 years. I think the Canberra press gallery, most of whom live within about five kilometres of Canberra in suburbs like Forrest, Red Hill, Kingston and Manuka, have no idea of what the real people of Canberra are like. It used to be the standing joke that no-one could find their way from the press gallery to Tuggeranong or to Woden because anywhere further than the shops at Kingston or the coffee shops at Manuka and they were lost.

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There is another aspect of reporting out of Canberra which worries me and which worried me when I was there, and that was the pack mentality of the gallery. There is no other feeling like it. Canberra is one place in Australia where you can get the Sydney and Melbourne papers delivered at the same time. You would hear the thud on the lawn at about 6 o'clock on a cold Canberra morning. The *Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* the *Australian*, the *Financial Review*, the *Herald Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Canberra Times* in a great big bundle would go thumping onto the lawn. You would race out and grab them, go back into the kitchen, throw them on the table and scan them, not for what they have got to say but to see whether one of your colleagues had something that you had missed the night before. You knew very well that if one of them had a story that you did not have you would get a phone call at about 11 o'clock from the editor, when he picked up his copy of the interstate papers, saying, 'Why has the *Age* got this and we haven't?' It is no point saying, 'Look, the *Age* is absolutely wrong. The story is not there.' If the *Age* had it or, worse still, if the *Australian* had it the *Courier-Mail* had to have it. It was impossible to explain to my then editor, who had no experience of working in Canberra and really no experience of political reporting at all - it was impossible to explain - that the *Age* was wrong or the *Australian* was wrong and we were actually right by not having the story. It did not work.

Part of the problem is that newspapers now tend to be edited by production people, not by writers. Production people become production people very early in their newspaper careers. They do not really have a wide experience of reporting. I cannot think of the last editor of a major Australian newspaper who has actually worked in Canberra. Kelly is the only one. There is this pack mentality. There is this feeling that, 'Okay, if Oakes has got it on the 6 o'clock news tonight, it is obviously right, so therefore we will all write about that tonight.' Or if Grattan is saying something, 'Grattan has been around a long time.' There really is not the kind of diversity of opinion that you would expect. Allied to that is the fact that only in Sydney and Melbourne is there any newspaper competition. The *Australian* is really a complementary paper rather than a competitive one. You get a kind of sameness of commentary and a sameness of opinion. I think that is sad. I do not think that we get the diversity of comment that you would see, say, in the *Guardian*, the *Independent* or even the *London Telegraph* or the *London Times*, let alone the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. Our papers are essentially parochial and they are dealing with three levels of government. Certainly in this state if it happens in Brisbane it is important; if it happens in Canberra it is much less important.

I think a lot of people have been in Canberra for far too long. I was there for seven or eight years and I was pleased to get out. Wally Brown, my predecessor, went there in 1961 and retired in 1985. Grattan has been there nearly 30 years. Oakes has been there about the same time. It is the sort of place where newspaper managements, if they are clever - if they are smart - should be rotating people through. Because, as I say, after a while it starts to get to you. You start to think it is important. And yet there are decisions being made in the CBD of Sydney every day of the week that are much more important than the decisions being made in cabinet, with the possible exception of the decision they will make tonight.

But it has been 30 years of fun as well, although it is not terribly funny to pick up the telephone and be at the end of a Keating tirade for something you have written, or Laurie Brereton, who can be pretty scatological in his language. It is not much fun to be branded a dangerous lefty by a cabinet minister simply because of something that you have written. But you have some interesting times. I think probably one of the funniest things that happened to me was in the 1998 election campaign. I did not spend all my time on it because I was out of Canberra, but I went off to Perth to do some colour pieces, commentary and so on. We were invited for drinks with the Prime Minister and Mrs Howard. Over a glass of indifferent chardonnay, Jeanette came up to me and said, 'I've just realised where I know you from.' I said, 'I've been around Canberra for years, Mrs Howard.' 'No. You were at the University of New South Wales, weren't you?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You played Rugby, didn't you?' I said, 'Yes.' You were a friend of that nice Michael Grace. I was a train driver's son from Newcastle; I didn't move in the same social circles as the heir and successor to the Grace Brothers retail fortune. But Mick Grace was in the same team. So we chatted for a while. The Prime Minister came over and said, 'Come on, Jeanette. We should circulate.' 'No, I'm enjoying this.' It turned out that I had this vague recollection of this rather demure young lady in tweed, twin-sets and pearls, as people used to dress for the Rugby in the mid sixties. This went on for about another five minutes. Howard came over and said, 'Come on, Jeanette, move.' 'No.' Finally, he took her by the arm and dragged her

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off. A group of us then went down to Cottesloe to a restaurant on the beach for dinner. Someone said, 'Were you trying to move on to the Prime Minister's wife?' I said, 'No. I'm a single man, but not that bloody single.' It turned out that we knew each other vaguely at university years and years ago and we knew a lot of people in common.

I was telling Gerard Henderson the story about it and he said, 'You got under Howard's skin.' I said, 'Why? How?' Henderson said, 'Howard went to Sydney University law school.' Those of you who know the law school in Sydney know that it's actually in the CBD, in the legal precinct. It's not on campus. He went there and only did a law degree - no arts degree - so he had no experience of campus life, and he did it while he was working as an articled clerk, going to lectures in the afternoon. Jeanette Howard - or Jeanette Parker as she then was - was heavily involved in student societies at the University of New South Wales and I was majoring in beer and rugby. He had absolutely no experience of university life, of campus life. I had not realised that. When you think about that, it kind of informs a whole lot of things about Howard.

Election campaigns used to be fun, as I said, but they could also be pretty demanding. From 1996 they tended to be very tightly controlled, as I mentioned. You were not told where you were going that night, until you got on the bus that morning. I was sitting on the phone in Sydney, talking to the office back here, saying, 'Yes, we are going to be in Brisbane tomorrow, but I have no idea where we are going to be.' The idea was to keep the protesters away, not to spoil the television moment.

I think it was February and we were taken out to a scout hall somewhere in the electorate of Moreton. It was a pretty typical Queensland scout hall that had no insulation in the ceiling and was up high. There were a few protesters outside, so they put everyone into the scout hall and closed the windows. In February, in Brisbane, it was pretty unpleasant.

That was the campaign where no-one got to spend two nights in the same hotel. The logistics become important, because if you do not spend two nights in the same hotel you cannot get your laundry done. It is as simple as that. I have story about Cathy Job, who was then working for the ABC. The ABC would not pay for her laundry bill, so she came back into the ABC's financial controller's office on the Monday morning, after about three weeks of campaigning, with a plastic garbage bag and dumped three weeks' worth of knickers and bras onto his desk.

After about four or five weeks of this, you are sort of dragging yourself. You have no idea where you are. You are ringing reception in the middle of the night to find out what city you are in, let alone what hotel you are in. It has been made immeasurably easier by mobile telephones and modern laptop computers, but I would not have missed it for quids. It has been 30 years of pleasure, 30 years of dealing with some extraordinary politicians and 30 years of privilege, really. I enjoyed every moment of it.