



Role of the Media

Includes information and commentary by Honorary Research Fellow Dr Paul Reynolds.

The media is one of the most important and effective mechanisms for the control of powerful institutions and individuals by reason of its ability to sway public opinion. Those who wish to mould public opinion must do so largely through the media.¹

The journalists who cover the Queensland Parliament are collectively identified as the Parliamentary Media Gallery. These journalists, who work for newspaper, television and radio organisations, collect and publish information on parliamentary activities.

As noted in the quote above, the media play significant roles in democratic societies, such as Queensland, as they enable the community to learn about matters of public concern. The Westminster system of parliamentary democracy is based on the proposition that the governments, answerable to the people, decide policy, and that public servants implement it. Through the media, Queenslanders can expect to be informed about government decision-making processes, to debate these decisions, to comment on Government conduct, and to demand that decision-makers defend their stance.

The media provides information to the public by its reporting of and commentary upon the proceedings within the Parliament, the operations of the Government, and the views and alternate policies of the Opposition. All of these activities rely on access to information.

The Role of the Media

The Parliamentary Media Gallery is so named because of their location in the gallery overlooking the Legislative Assembly Chamber to the right of the Speaker's Chair. This enables the journalists to see and hear everything that occurs during a parliamentary debate.

When the House is sitting, the media attend the Parliament in strength and usually the Parliamentary Press Gallery is crowded during Question Time. The main task of a parliamentary journalist is to select information about parliamentary debates and events that are of interest to their readers/viewers. They then need to present this information in such a way that enables Queenslanders to be aware of what decisions are being made in Parliament.

A media room is provided next to the media gallery so that newspaper and radio journalists can collate

and transmit parliamentary news items. Other facilities include mini-television studios and an interview room. An in-house television coverage of the Chamber's business allows journalists to keep in touch with the proceedings throughout the parliamentary complex. Further, the broadcast of the Parliament's proceedings over the internet allows journalists, and all Queenslanders, to also monitor debate relevant to their interests. Sound and video clippings can also be accessed for use in news bulletins.

Even when the House is not sitting, a lesser media presence still exists, particularly as government ministers and shadow ministers use the facilities for press conferences.

The Media and Freedom of Information

From the media's viewpoint, reporting Parliament is relatively straightforward owing to: increased facilities and resources; the fact that Parliament is an open and public forum and reporters have largely unhindered access to the deliberations and hearings of parliamentary committees. However, the media needs also to report and comment on the affairs of Government, its policy directions, administrative activity and the impact it has on both stakeholder groups and public opinion.

Since the Fitzgerald Report (1989), Government/media relations have been broadly based on Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation. As the report recommended FOI, the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission accordingly presented Government with a model FOI Bill. This was adopted and, in 1992, was passed. However, this brought to light a new set of tensions between the media and Government. The former wanted the Act to have the widest scope possible in the name of transparency and accountability; whereas the Government needed to keep certain matters from the public domain owing to confidentiality and the doctrine of collective responsibility by which all Cabinet deliberations, together with all information on which Cabinet relies, remain private. The 20-year² rule of confidentiality seals all Cabinet documents and, even after this period, some are never released, and others are censored when released.

The problem then was where to draw the line as both sides acknowledged each other's different needs, but had differing priorities. For its part, the Government, three years after the Act came into force, felt that too much information was subject to FOI requests. The media opposed any restrictions, in part to avoid having to rely on leaks, informal off the record briefings, propaganda masquerading as information and spin doctoring. In a major disagreement, in 1995 the Government amended the FOI Act to restrict the availability of information by widening the criteria by which documentation went before Cabinet and thus was exempt from FOI requests. The media charged that this was merely a ruse to cover up



potentially embarrassing or inconvenient material while Government responded that the media often embarked on a 'fishing expedition' to provide copy that sensationalised and distorted Government actions.

While journalists may be unhappy with government restrictions on FOI, it is safe to say that they would not favour returning to the pre-FOI era.

Relationships and Influence

Political commentators have remarked upon the complex relationships between the media and parliamentary Members as well as the Government, the Opposition and political parties. Advances in communication, largely through the internet, have improved community access to information. Therefore, the media play an important role in society as a source of information, but also as a "watchdog" or scrutiniser.

Members of Parliament often depend on the media to inform Queenslanders, and possibly others nationally and internationally, about what is happening in the Parliament. As a result, journalists are quite powerful because they decide which issues, and thus the supporting Member - Government and/or Opposition - to publicise. Journalists also decide the angle or the content of the story. In this way, the media play a very

important scrutinising role in the Parliament.

Over the years, Governments have established sophisticated information units to ensure that their policies gain maximum coverage. As well, Ministers and political parties employ press secretaries for the same purpose. The media, however, aim to filter the information received and present information in a way which they believe best represents the "story". This story may cause discomfort to Members, the Government or Opposition and political parties. However, the media are free to select the stories they consider important or interesting. Therefore, the media are often perceived as an influencer of public opinion. On the other hand, many of the press secretaries have previously been employed by the media and there is a constant interchange between the two groups.

The media's role in the Queensland Parliament is therefore multifaceted and cannot be viewed solely as reporter of parliamentary and Government news items to the public, but as a participant in a complex process involving both mutual and competing interests.

¹*The Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct*, p. 141, 1989, chaired by Tony Fitzgerald QC, describing the role of the media. [The Fitzgerald Report]

²Cabinet documents created after 1 July 2009 are administratively released after 20 years. Those created prior to 1 July 2009 are administratively released after 30 years.