

A Politician's Experiences with the News: Insights from the Howson Diaries

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Peter Howson, *The Howson Diaries: The Life of Politics*, edited by Don Aitkin, Ringwood, Vic, The Viking Press, 1984.

This is the first published diary of an Australian cabinet minister since Lord Casey and it is richly rewarding for anyone interested in the era of Liberal decline following Menzies. Howson was a member of parliament from the first election after the Labor split, 1955, until the advent of the Whitlam government in 1972. He was a minister from 1964 until his demotion by Gorton in 1968 and then minister again under McMahon from mid 1971 until the government's fall in December 1972. Howson's role and influence in the Liberal Party were greater than is suggested by the relatively junior portfolios he held because of his connections with the business and Liberal Party establishments in Melbourne. In many ways the most politically interesting aspect of the diaries is his leading role in the overthrow of John Gorton as prime minister.

Diaries make compulsive reading. They are more revealing than memoirs and autobiographies, where too often the inconsistencies, uncertainties, and false starts are transformed into a smooth retrospective.¹ Its first appeal is the revelations about feelings beyond public view in conservative politics:

We were all scared of (Menzies) in Cabinet; most

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Ministers waited to see what RGM wanted before committing themselves on an issue. (23 January 1966)

The air of depression at the Melbourne Club is still very marked; it's the most depressing place in Australia at the present time. (29 November 1972)

Howson emerges as an honest diarist, modest and self-appraising, of unbending conservatism, and with an underlying integrity sometimes tempered by the temptation to let loyalty to party and colleagues take precedence.

There is much of interest to media students. There is plenty of material for those who suspected that there was frequent contact between Liberal politicians and media proprietors:

Fairfax: Bill McMahon...told me that Warwick Fairfax has had two hours with John McEwen this morning, and it looks as if the Sydney Morning Herald will definitely be anti-Gorton from now on. (3 November 1969)

Packer: He tells me that Frank Packer told Gorton that if he continued to persecute Bill McMahon that he (Frank) would turn his press against Gorton. (9 April 1969) Afterwards a talk with Clyde Packer who runs GTV9, indicating to him that Bill McMahon would still have a strong chance of success in the leadership challenge if he could be persuaded to throw in his lot as early as possible. ... Bill McMahon rang this morning; he'd obviously been talking to Frank Packer and is now reconsidering a challenge. (31 October, 1 November 1969)

The Herald and Weekly Times: I went to see Phil Jones of the Melbourne Herald...I found that Jones is very much behind Bill McMahon...and is certainly going to do everything he can to help us win the next election. (16 April 1971)

Murdoch: Alan (Ramsey) indicated that a recent leading article in the Australian had been written at Rupert Murdoch's own instigation, as if John Gorton

had personally asked Rupert to restore some of the fading image in Canberra, and that Rupert had done this as the act of a friend. (14 May 1968)

Even the Ringwood Mail: A very useful talk with Harald Nicolson, the owner of the Ringwood Mail...At the end, Harald told me categorically that he will be supporting me wholeheartedly in the election campaign, even if there may be the odd hostile article from time to time in order to attain a balance. (4 July 1969)

The chumminess between proprietors and conservative politicians, however, seemed to be decreasingly effective in managing the news, something Howson regretted:

Ted Heath dropped in for a drink before lunch...We then talked about the takeover of the Packer press by Murdoch. He feels that this is going to cause us a lot of political harm in Australia, and we both deplored that so much policy had been taken away from editors and handed to Press Gallery correspondents, a dangerous tendency. (25 June 1972)

Alan Reid rang me. I told him how worried I'd been about the very bad press reaction to Bill McMahon; it's so much worse than when I left for overseas two months ago. Alan tells me that the main problem is with the Press Gallery who are annoyed that Bill has gone over their heads to their editors. They are prepared to take it out on Bill at every possible opportunity, particularly Allan Barnes of the Age. We believe that the situation has now gone so far that it's not possible to restore it by being pleasant to the Press Gallery, and that possibly the editors may be able to retrieve some of the bad image in the weeks prior to the election. This is the sort of problem that Ted Heath mentioned to me in England and Senator Dole in Washington. (4 August 1972)²

The diaries offer a rare view of a politician's perceptions of interactions with journalists, of the strange role relations between partisan sources and supposedly disinterested observers. It should be remembered that all of these are Howson's account of what transpired, and while there is no need to doubt the frankness of what he has recorded, there is still scope for misunderstanding and selective recall in summary descriptions of fluid transactions coming from only one of the two parties.

The first point of note is the extent of information exchange. In several cases, reporters are acting as a source of information and

assessments to Howson. This is a normal by-product of a journalist's role, which no doubt aids their own information gathering and forming of political judgments. The meetings with Walsh and Reid below are normal interactions between reporters trying to assess, and participants trying to influence, the currents of internal party allegiances, with both sides trying to gauge the intangibles of political mood.

I saw Max Walsh of the Financial Review this morning and told him that he's been printing for some time an alleged tie-up between myself and Bill Snedden going back to the time of the leadership stakes in January last year. I explained that I had never been voting for Bill and that I would be grateful if he eradicated the myth from now on. It gave me a chance to talk to Max Walsh, who has been generally antagonistic to me over the years, particularly when he was close to Malcolm Fraser. (14 May 1969) Afterwards I had a talk with Alan Reid, who feels that there is a greater amount of tension in Parliament House this week than he's ever known, that backbenchers on both sides of the House are getting fed up with the leadership. (20 May 1969)

The information exchange was two-way, with journalists not only sharing information about politics but about the media.

John Bennetts waylaid me and talked on internal problems on the Age management. Wish I could do something to improve the situation. (12 April 1965)

A talk this morning with Alan Reid, who agreed with my summation of the 'Get Gorton Back' movement. Alan tells me that the Press Gallery in Canberra is now very much white-anted by Ainsley (Gotto) and that at the moment Bill McMahon hardly has a friend among the media there. (20 November 1971)

Sometimes this extended to advice about communication and media problems:

At Alan Reid's suggestion, I wrote a letter to the Melbourne Herald to deny what John Sorrell had written last Friday (an untrue story alleging Howson was a candidate for Chisholm, but on which he found the paper unwilling to print a denial) and at last have got them to publish it later this week. (18 August 1970)

Because reporters live off others' disclosures it is normal that they also offer disclosures in return, and inevitable that this will extend to revelations

and gossip about the media. Given that they are so interested in others' internal operations, reporters can hardly think there is anything improper about offering views on their colleagues. The 'internal problems' Bennetts was referring to were probably the accession of Graham Perkin as editor. Others may question Bennetts' judgment but, unless he is seeking external intervention, not his right to offer it to outsiders. In the advice cited above, Reid is acting as a technical adviser in dealing with a media problem — probably a common activity of journalists and in cases like this, where the politician has been the victim of a baseless report which he is having trouble rectifying, not problematic. In the earlier quote about the troublesome independence of the press gallery, if Reid were advising the government to circumvent the gallery by going to their editors, his colleagues would be less likely to be impressed.

The line between technical adviser and political advocate is a fine one, and from Howson's account, some journalists were more participants than observers. One must proceed with caution here. Howson, like all politicians, is primarily attuned to questions of support and opposition, seeing news accounts in terms of their partisan implications. This can produce misperceptions. The diary typically describes stories as 'helpful' or as 'attacks'.

The press has been attacking me this morning, saying that I am bound to be dropped from the Ministry at the end of the week. (February 1968)

That such reports proved accurate apparently didn't change their status as attacks. Similarly in the following talk with Max Walsh, although the tone is rather pontifical, the key question in terms of journalistic ethics is how Walsh intended to support Les Bury.³

Later this evening I had a talk with Max Walsh about this morning's party room meeting; he agreed that McEwen is too old to be considered as an alternative to Gorton, and Max is thinking of supporting Leslie Bury. He certainly feels that both Malcolm Fraser and Bill Snedden have blotted their copybooks this session and couldn't possibly be considered for the job of Prime Minister for the next few years. (22 April 1970)

At other times journalists were open advocates, but in issues irrelevant to their journalistic task:

Alan Reid wants RAAF help to drop food for cattle marooned in snow near Canberra. (28 July 1964)

Here, Reid is promoting a cause close to his heart. Journalists have the same rights to lobby as other citizens, although their role does give them readier access and, rightly or wrongly, may give them more chance of success.

Most revealing is the strength of Howson's relationship with veteran Australian Consolidated Press correspondent, Alan Reid, and how readily Reid appears to want to further Howson's political positions.

Alan Reid called in to see me. He's worried about the way in which the Sydney press are attacking us on defence expenditure. Together we worked out a plan for combating this with a series of articles in the Sunday Telegraph; I will write one on the F-111; Professor Millar will write one on the way in which the F-111 fits into the strategic picture, and the editor will come in with a leading article on the subject. Alan has certainly been helpful on this. It was useful that I managed to put the idea into his head when we met in the corridor a little earlier on this afternoon. (24 August 1967, p 321; also p 322)

My main reason for ringing Alan (Reid) was to emphasise the necessity for David Fairbairn to get some good publicity in the Melbourne press early in the new year; apparently he's been doing well in Sydney. Alan said he would do what he could to help this along in the next few weeks, particularly when some of the correspondents come back from holidays. (17 December 1969)

Another phone call today from Bill McMahon... At another party this week, the PM (Gorton) emphasised that nothing the press could do would cause him to think of resignation in the coming year. Obviously the press campaign is starting to affect him. As Alan Reid says, the press must redouble their efforts. (20 December 1969)

I had a good talk with Alan Reid and David Fairbairn after Question Time this morning, Alan saying that on no account should I try to hurry the crisis but to let it develop, as everything indicated that things were moving slowly but surely in the right direction. (22 April 1970)

This is a relationship between political allies, not between adversaries, or even source and observer. As reported, Reid was seeking

determinedly and over a long period, to have a Liberal leader he and Howson disliked replaced with another (almost any other). Reid's calls for the press to redouble its efforts, his promises to secure favourable publicity for David Fairbairn and on the F-111 suggest a willingness to use the news columns to an ulterior political end. Some would also object to his constant offering of tactical advice, given the completely political end to which it was directed.

One of the few people in the diaries who figure more than Alan Reid is Sir William McMahon. The phrase 'Bill McMahon rang' punctuates the diary like a Greek chorus, with comments on the latest developments. Whidam's sobriquet for McMahon—'Tiberius with a telephone'—aptly fits, but the speculations about who leaked what are more reminiscent of the intrigues from I, Claudius.

The Age broke the news of Barwick's promotion to be Chief Justice. Only five ministers knew of this — PM, Holt, McEwen, Spooner and McMahon. Who gave the leak? McMahon told me it was McEwen. But was this to divert attention from himself? (22 April 1964)

The diary gives ample testament to the potency of leaks in fuelling resentments and suspicions in party battles:

Bill McMahon...(told) me that most of the leaks to the press, particularly to the Bulletin, over the last week on defence matters have been through Malcolm Fraser talking to Frank Packer. I reminded Bill that I had suggested that Malcolm was the main leak of Cabinet secrets just at the time before Harold died, and Bill McMahon confirmed that he knew this (24 May 1968)

(Don Chipp) is most unhappy to have learnt of the machinations of Malcolm Fraser, who has been going out of his way to set the press against both the Navy and Air, and to a certain extent against Defence, and against Bill Snedden in order to increase the press estimate of Malcolm himself. Don has just had concrete evidence from certain press correspondents that this has been happening, and it confirms what both Don and I have felt over the last few weeks. This is one of the crosses, I told him, that we both have to bear...we can take suitable action to deal with it. (12 February 1968)

Bill McMahon rang me again to tell me of various leaks that have occurred from Cabinet in the last two

or three days...It appears as if these leaks could only have come from Gorton. (10 April 1971)

The prevalence of leaks even seems to have occasioned a widening of the vice-regal role which constitutional scholars can ponder.

At dinner Bill (McMahon) asked me why I thought he was not trusted. I told him of the views of the party on his relationship with Max Newton which had caused so much comment...Bill also told me of a talk he had had with the Governor-General (Casey) concerning his own position, in which it had also been made clear by the Governor-General that McMahon's relationship with Newton should cease in the interest of national security. (18 December 1967)

Some were just inadvertent:

I thought Bill (McMahon) knew Bruce Grant. He told me afterwards that he hadn't recognised him. As usual Bill spoke rather openly, and then was rather annoyed when some of the things he mentioned tonight appeared in an article written by Bruce Grant in the Age. (24 February 1970)

Others were seen as a malicious nuisance:

Heard that Colin Tatz had announced on *This Day Tonight* that he knew for a fact that Lord Vestey was prepared to hand over at least 1,500 square miles of Wave Hill to the Commonwealth. Tatz could only have got this information from (Dr H C 'Nugget') Coombs, and I think it's been deliberately leaked...in order to make things difficult for us, especially as he knows that this matter is likely to be considered in Canberra within the next few days. (21 August 1972)⁴

The last is one illustration of the continuing interplay between news reporting and the unfolding of political episodes illustrated in the diaries. Sometimes it is prosaic — the use of media content to add ammunition in ongoing political manoeuvres:

The Sydney Morning Herald today has a highly critical leading article on Dudley Erwin, and this will give me a tag on which to hang my general line of criticism. (18 April 1969)

At others it is more dramatic, as in the development of the VIP planes affair. This, the major blight on Howson's career, and one which aided Gorton's rise to leadership, was a strange episode concerning the government's use of aircraft for ministers and others, which grew into a cause célèbre because of the government's

mishandling of it. As Minister for Air, Howson was severely embarrassed because of his own failure to act decisively or frankly, which mainly sprang from following Prime Minister Holt's lead. The episode was a classic instance of how disclosure in the media and conflicting public statements can build a political intensity which the substance of the affair itself would never warrant.

Endnotes

1. Two examples of inconsistencies are Howson's changing attitudes to criticisms of official conduct after the sinking of HMAS *Voyager* and beliefs about leadership manoeuvres before Holt's death. In neither case is it clear when or why he changed his mind and in both cases the change was consonant with his developing position in internal Liberal politics.

2. It seems that in private Reid was more critical of Barnes than he was when writing. For example, responding to an internal Liberal memo which described Barnes as 'coldly determined to destroy us', Reid wrote that 'I disagreed with Southey's judgement ... In my view, Barnes had an independent mind and was a very competent newspaperman doing his job with professional integrity'. Alan Reid, *The Whitlam Venture*, Melbourne, Hill of Content, 1976, 36, 48.
3. The quote embarrasses Walsh's judgment more than his integrity. Les Bury's charisma is best illustrated by an old press gallery story that once Allan Barnes went to tape an interview with Bury and there is a long gap in the middle of the tape, where first Barnes fell asleep and then Bury did too.
4. 'Nugget' Coombs seems to have been a particular bête noir of Howson's and a few other leaks are blamed on him. Howson's portfolio was the arbitrary amalgam of 'Environment, Arts and Aborigines'. In two of these areas, the influential and more progressive Coombs was head of statutory authorities.

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