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Tip of the Iceberg or Moral Panic?

Police Corruption Issues in Contemporary New South Wales

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The most contentious issues in news coverage of scandals concern issues of proportion and prevalence. In New South Wales, the issue of police corruption has been on political and media agendas for more than three decades. The media reporting has included some landmark pieces of investigative reporting and dramatic revelations in trials and royal commissions but also sensationalism and rhetorical extravagance. Despite the prolonged attention and prolific coverage, serious questions remain about how well the extent and nature of corruption were reported and whether the media has conveyed the degree of reform in police practices.

Keywords: scandals; corruption; police; news; Australia

INTRODUCTION: FIVE TYPES OF DISPUTES OVER NEWS COVERAGE

News coverage of scandals typically generates contention and controversy. Some criticisms are obviously self-interested—special pleading by aggrieved participants or deliberate ploys aimed at containing the political impact of the revelations. Often however, the criticisms pose difficult issues in arbitrating what separates accurate from inaccurate and fair from unfair news coverage. A first step in examining such disputes is to disentangle the issues. Five different criticisms of the quality of news coverage need to be considered independently:

- a. inaccuracy: that one or more important elements in the story are wrong;
- b. selectivity: that the news organizations display selective zeal and outrage based on partisan or other bias;
- c. disproportion: that the offense is attracting more intense attention than it deserves;
- d. contested frames: that the interpretations built into the presentation of news stories misrepresent the motives of participants or the reasons for actions;
- e. disputed prevalence: that through generalizations or insinuations the news is misleading about the extent and prevalence of the transgressions.

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Most public disputes are framed in terms of the first two, inaccuracy and bias. However, although less often explicitly addressed in public controversies, the latter three normally pose the more difficult intellectual judgments. They also relate more centrally to the interactions between news coverage and political processes.

The most common response of those caught up in scandals is to assert the inaccuracy of what has been reported. Sometimes of course these claims are valid. Sometimes they are simply defensive tactics designed to muddy the public picture. In most major Australian scandals that have acquired political currency, gross inaccuracy at least on the central claims has rarely been a crucial issue in evaluating news coverage.

Allegations of bias in the sense of the news organizations responding selectively to different claims of scandal because of their political outlook or partisanship are often hard to arbitrate. The comparative zeal of news organizations in pursuing claims of scandal sometimes correlates with their larger editorial attitudes, and professional judgments of newsworthiness become easily entwined with external influences, including partisanship. In the 1970s, the Melbourne *Herald* newspaper pursued with great vigor and persistence the Federal Labor Government's involvement in dubious loan ventures but never once made a significant breakthrough in the Victorian Liberal Government's lands scandals. It seems clear that the differential performance owed much to the paper's editorial sympathies and the different colors of the governments involved (Tiffen, 1999).

There are also many countervailing examples. Because no two scandals are exactly alike, it is often hard to judge whether they warranted similar treatment. Editorial bias is sometimes pertinent, but to cast the explanation of media coverage only in these terms is not only to underestimate the professionalism that many news organizations have displayed but also to make the media too initiating and insufficiently reactive. It centers the explanation for news coverage of scandals only in the editorial decision making of news organizations and not at all in the environment on which they are reporting.

It is the other three issues that most concern us in this article, which are probably the most pertinent in examining news coverage of most scandals and certainly so when considering organized crime and police corruption issues in New South Wales.

Probably the most contentious issue in the news coverage and politics of scandals concerns proportionality. It does not involve issues of accuracy in any simple or narrow sense but rather the degree of intensity that the scandal assumes and sometimes in the consequences demanded to flow from it. One aspect that makes the politics of scandals so explosive is that in terms of political (rather than legal) sanctions, the accused must often either suffer no tangible punishment or else suffer the political equivalent of capital punishment, having their public career terminated by resignation.

One of the most common criticisms of coverage of scandals is that the media exaggerated their importance. Sometimes the criticism is from the other direction, that fundamental corruption has been underreported or that the media failed to appreciate a matter of great principle. Such issues of proportion cannot be arbitrated according to some absolute standard. This issue was first crystallized for me when visiting Thailand after a right-wing military coup in 1976. There was much resentment among conservative Thais at the liberal, left-wing bias of the Western media covering the coup. One contentious issue concerned the killing of 29 student demonstrators at Thammasat University. The critics did not dispute the accuracy of the reports of the killings but rather that they had received too much attention. But what was the right amount of attention that such an event deserved? The answer will depend at least partly on the values of the observer.

Moreover, although in the news process there are many checks regarding the accuracy of individual stories, there is no means of controlling the collective intensity that a running story develops. Not only do interested observers frequently disagree over how much coverage a scandal merits, but the nature of the news enterprise makes it all but impossible for the media even to address such questions. Whether in retrospect one developing story received more attention than another is almost never due to some overall explicit decision. Rather, it is determined by the accumulation of short-term considerations of availability and newsworthiness to which competing individual organizations respond with some discretion but little control.

The fourth area of dispute, contested frames, concerns the images and concepts through which the news is presented. The presumptions of significance and interpretation built into the structure of stories and the often implicit construction of motives are often resented by those subjected to negative news coverage. Many of the concepts used to describe actions—even the idea of corruption—involve ambiguities but are used as blanket labels in news coverage in ways that can obscure important distinctions. Like all critical themes, this one can be wrongly asserted. Politicians often protest—and almost equally often self-servingly—that the media misconstrue their motives. Most commonly, they protest that the media only attribute to them base or political aims when they really have socially substantial purposes. However, the social imagery in which news is cast does often report characters in misleadingly one-dimensional terms. Frequently in the construction of relationships and the portrayal of causality in news presentations, nuances are crunched, complexities ignored, and a moral simplicity imposed.

Finally, whereas news concentrates on the reporting of particular actions, the presentation of news—both through reporting sources' claims and in reporters' interpretative comments—also lends itself to imputations about the prevalence of such behavior. Although there are many constraints and disciplines in the news about the reporting of individuals' actions, there are far fewer about the

making of generalizations. Anomalously, to say a specific police officer is corrupt may be defamatory, and enormous care would be needed before making such a claim. But to say the police force is full of corrupt officers means no one can sue for defamation. The sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit picture of the prevalence of offensive behavior is often one of the most problematic parts in evaluating coverage of scandals.

THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF POLICE CORRUPTION IN NEW SOUTH WALES

In Australia's federal system of government, policing is a state responsibility. Although all states have on occasion had scandals about police corruption, they have been most dramatic in New South Wales and Queensland. In New South Wales, the issue remains the most contested, and the reporting of organized crime and police corruption issues exemplifies the problematic issues about reporting scandals in an acute way. It raises questions about when and how corruption becomes visible, how it is framed and managed as a political issue, and how the appearance of corruption via the media relates to its incidence.

This article explores a period of three decades that began with institutional police corruption on the rise and finished with it clearly in retreat but with drama and contention attending every step. In the early period, corruption and organized crime issues figured only very marginally in news coverage or the political agenda. However, from the early 1980s on, corruption issues became an explosive and contentious staple of New South Wales politics. Media coverage played an important role in exposing the corruption, and inevitably the media's own role became part of the engulfing controversies that followed. Before reviewing the larger issues surrounding the disputes over news coverage, this article will review the major phases of the public career of corruption issues in New South Wales politics. (Table 1 lists the premiers and police commissioners in New South Wales since 1965.) We are dealing with changing interactions between three dynamic domains—the patterns of corruption and organized crime, the political conflicts and agendas, and the media's capacities and priorities. Each of these was changing because of larger structural trends. The extent and nature of organized crime and police corruption are then far from constant, and the intensity of public attention bears a problematic relationship to those changes.

TRADITIONAL POLICE CORRUPTION

Allegations about police corruption in New South Wales are almost as old as European settlement of the continent. Some commentators enjoy pointing to Sydney's origins as a penal colony to explain what is alleged to be a peculiarly strong tradition. Moreover, not only were the majority of early European settlers

TABLE 1: New South Wales Premiers and Commissioners of Police

Premiers	
May 1965-January 1975	Robert Askin (Liberal), won elections 1965, 1968, 1971, 1973
January 1975-January 1976	Tom Lewis (Liberal)
January 1976-May 1976	Eric Willis (Liberal)
May 1976-July 1986	Neville Wran (Labor), won elections 1976, 1978, 1981, 1984
July 1986-March 1988	Barry Unsworth (Labor)
March 1988-June 1992	Nick Greiner (Liberal), won elections 1988, 1991
June 1992-April 1995	John Fahey (Liberal)
April 1995-	Bob Carr (Labor), won elections 1995, 1999, 2003
Commissioners of Police	
1962-1972	Norman Allan
1972-1976	Fred Hanson
1976-1979	Merv Wood
1979-1981	Jim Lees
1981-1984	Cec Abbott
1984-1991	John Avery
1991-1995	Tony Lauer
1996-2002	Peter Ryan
2002-	Ken Moroney

of convict stock, but the jailers soon exploited their relatively privileged position, and the Rum Corps quickly established their power to the chagrin of some colonial governors. Perhaps unfortunately this peculiar and colorful history is less relevant to understanding contemporary corruption than the problems of policing that Sydney shares with other large cities in the Western world. Tradition may be part of the explanation for contemporary corruption insofar as it has led to institutionalized corruption, where self-perpetuating attitudes and expectations make it hard for honest police to break the pattern. However, even here the most important factor is the contemporary opportunity structures that permit its continuation.

Police corruption to greatly varying degrees seems to be a feature of most large societies. Its sources lie in the nature of police work. The scope for secrecy and relatively unaccountable power is always conducive to corruption. In addition, the inherent difficulties of policing, including the need in both intelligence and enforcement to be regularly dealing with a range of characters operating on the fringes of respectability and/or beyond the law, presents more opportunities and temptations than the rest of the population is normally subjected to. As *Cahill's Manual of Policing* advised officers early this century, police were expected to maintain "a friendly intercourse with all the respectable inhabitants, and a useful knowledge of all the bad characters" (Finnane, 1994, p. 173).

All occupations generate guilty knowledge. Although all professions publicly protest their virtue, social value, and personal sacrifice, private talk is often of occupational tricks and shortcuts, of the dubious maneuvers that make the

socially required performance possible or provide private satisfactions that conflict with public expectations. Politicians for example love to boast privately about their capacities as dealmakers. One such dubious practice in police work is the need to construct legally compelling prosecutions against suspects. This has led to what some have called *noble cause* corruption (breaking the law to enforce it). Police officers manufacture evidence to obtain a conviction against perpetrators in a judicial system they believe is stacked against successful prosecutions. Of course, it also lends itself to innocent people being so prosecuted, and to police “fitting up” those they disapprove of. Such corruption has been shielded from public exposure not only by the relative social invisibility of police work but also by the sense of brotherhood, the police culture that places a premium on solidarity and loyalty to its own members.

However, the major issues of police corruption and our primary concern in this article concern the opportunities for officers to abrogate their duties in enforcing the law by accepting bribes. The critical issue is when this progresses beyond individual rotten apples to become institutionalized corruption. Traditionally, the most prolific area for institutionalized police corruption has been in the enforcement of “victimless” crimes, including abortion, prostitution, illegal drugs, illegal gambling, restrictions on alcohol consumption, and homosexuality. They are areas where there is a strong constituency, often religious, that seeks to enforce personal moral standards through legislation but where outlawing the activity or substance does not stop the demand for it. Rather than the common term *victimless crime*, it is more accurate to refer to these as crimes without a complainant. In some cases a victim may be identified, but typically in these offenses, unlike say an ordinary robbery, either no one wishes or is able to complain to the authorities.

Even when there exists a strong will to do so, police find these types of crime almost impossible to eradicate. The legal prohibition greatly increases the prices that can be charged, so the supply of illicit goods and services typically provides a lucrative industry for the criminal organizations involved. Cozy and mutually profitable arrangements with the police aimed at containment often then replace normal law enforcement. Prosecution is marked by a high degree of inconsistency, sometimes subject to the payment of bribes and even partisanship for favored criminals against their rivals. Moreover, in some areas where there has been official prohibition (e.g., in gambling, abortion, prostitution, and restrictions on alcohol), many police officers have not shared the official moral disapproval and so have seen little wrong with abetting these endeavors.

The most widespread police corruption has traditionally centered on such victimless crimes, although when using this term, it must always be remembered that the various gangs and organizations typically used violence in their turf wars and against debtors and any others who crossed them. Their commercial dealings also frequently involved severely one-sided, exploitative relationships. Prostitution was one staple of these activities. Another involved the “sly grog” operations, selling alcohol outside the then stringent legal limits on hours

and venues of sale. The largest enterprise however derived from illegal gambling. The academic Al McCoy (1980) estimated the combined income of organized crime in Sydney in 1975 as \$2.2 billion. Whether or not this figure is reliable, his estimated proportions are enlightening. McCoy considered that well over 90% of the revenue was generated by various types of gambling. The major income streams from illegal gambling were off-course "SP" betting on horse races and secondly the various on-site forms of illegal gambling, such as casinos, two-up, and baccarat.

THE PERIOD OF POLITICAL COMPLICITY: THE ASKIN ERA, 1965-1975

Robert Askin broke 24 years of continuous Labor rule. A ruthless politician, conservative in his views, editorially supported by the major media, he ran very hard on law-and-order issues. During a visit by President Lyndon Johnson to Australia, Askin earned international fame by telling the media he had advised the driver of President Johnson's car to run the bastards over when anti-Vietnam War demonstrators blocked its route. He was however more avid in his pursuit of left-wing demonstrators than of illegal gamblers.

This was the critical era in the escalation and consolidation of organized crime and police corruption. Wider social changes were bringing traditional crime empires under stress but also creating new opportunities amid an increasingly affluent and mobile society. One opportunity was the increased drug use that came generally from what was called the permissive society but was accelerated specifically by the large numbers of American troops on R&R from the Vietnam War (Hall, 1986). However, by far the biggest part of organized crime concerned illegal gambling. This flourished during the Askin years, especially after a series of gang wars in 1967-1968 established a degree of stability among the illegal operators (Hall, 1986; McCoy, 1980). Illegal casinos became increasingly brazen, with bigger equipment, plusher furniture, and opening premises that had easy street access. Despite these obvious, indeed provocative signs of their growth, "the number of convictions under the Gaming and Betting Act dropped from nearly 4,000 in 1965 to only 618 in 1973" (Hickie, 1985, p. 65).

Some police officers under the protection of the institutionalized corruption had even become criminal entrepreneurs themselves. The most notorious, Fred Krahe, was not only selectively enforcing the law and abetting his own favored criminals but was himself actively involved. As was the custom of the time, he was allowed to retire on medical grounds rather than face a proper investigation.

It was only in 1973 that illegal gambling suddenly became a major political issue. Police Commissioner Hanson pleaded how difficult it was to gain access to the clubs, a claim the media had great joy in disproving (Hickie, 1985; McCoy, 1980). The most spectacular media exposés were on the ABC daily current affairs TV program, *This Day Tonight*. On one occasion, their reporter,

Peter Manning, positioned himself outside one of the best known establishments. The program began with him making a phone call to the police informing them that illegal gambling was going on and inviting them to raid the place. The program then interviewed a former police officer who claimed that it was because of bribery to police and politicians that the clubs were able to stay open. Intermittently, they switched back to Manning to report the lack of police action following his call (Peach, 1992).

These issues provided some awkward moments for Askin, but they were occasional and passing embarrassments rather than sustained political crises. Controversy continued to simmer after his retirement, but it only flared into open accusations immediately following his death. Before the funeral, the *National Times* published the most dramatic accusation possible: that Askin and Police Commissioner Hanson had been on the payroll of one of Sydney's best known gambling figures, Perc Galea. From this point on, it entered into conventional wisdom that Askin was corrupt—despite sporadic attempts by his acolytes to argue otherwise (Reading, 1989).

THE POLITICS OF CONTAINMENT: THE EARLY WRAN ERA, 1976-1981

The election of Labor's Neville Wran, one of the most talented and one of the most electorally successful Australian politicians of the past several decades, created a breathing space from the allegations of the final years of coalition rule. His honeymoon and the spectacular electoral successes of his early years gave him huge political latitude and put corruption issues into abeyance. Wran's initial attitude seemed to be to let sleeping dogs lie. His political strategy was not to allow corruption issues to place a series of impossible demands on his government to its electoral detriment. For the first several years, his strategy largely worked politically.

Wran had accepted the nomination of the outgoing government for Merv Wood to succeed Hanson as police commissioner (Whitton, 1987). This caused him some embarrassment in the following years. Wood made a number of statements suggesting he would not close down illegal casinos (Dempster, 1992), once exciting great public ridicule by saying it would be unfair to put 300 employees out of work so close to Christmas (Whitton, 1987).

Wood was the last of three successive police commissioners for whom there were strong grounds for considering actively corrupt (Whitton, 1987). By this stage, some close observers believed that "corruption was so widespread and so institutionalised that it was a virtual prerequisite to promotion" (Steketee & Cockburn, 1986, p. 276). Whatever the virtues and limits of succeeding commissioners, none has been corrupt in the same way. Although there was no longer corruption at the very top of the force, neither was there any determination to

combat it as a serious problem. The police subculture of mutual solidarity, an automatic resistance to and dismissal of all external criticism, still ruled. The police commissioners handled problems of corruption that arose in terms of political management but without any evidence of a serious commitment to reform.

Eventually, this combination of political containment and police indifference produced problems for Wran. There was a slow accumulation of cynicism regarding perceived inaction by police and government, which some increasingly claimed was due to the pervasiveness of corruption. For example, a police officer criticized as corrupt by the Moffitt Royal Commission continued to be promoted, with no action following the commission's negative finding. The Woodward Report called for special action against police suspected of corruption in relation to the marijuana industry. But no action followed. Similar inaction and lack of curiosity became a standard means of seeking to defuse the immediate pressures. However, the cumulative impact was of a parade of allegations passing apparently uninvestigated.

THE POLITICS OF CONTESTATION: THE LATER WRAN ERA, 1982-1986

After Wran rewrote the electoral landscape in New South Wales with massive wins in 1978 and 1981, at the height of his dominance, his political fortunes started to turn. The second half of Wran's premiership was dominated by corruption issues. From 1982 onwards, a series of scandals exploded. As Marian Wilkinson (1996) wrote, "Labor's Wran slide was eroded by a mudslide" (p. 235).

The last 5 years of the Wran government were marked by increasingly strident clashes over the presence and extent of corruption. They fed on several sources. One was the police's inability to solve crimes where there was a strong suspicion that organized criminals had been responsible. Some of these unsolved crimes became causes celebres, subjects of continuing speculation. In particular, the murders of antidevelopment campaigner in Kings Cross, Juanita Neilson, and of antidrugs campaigner in Griffith, Donald Mackay, displayed what seemed like a deliberate police incapacity to solve them. In addition, the vicious bashing of left-wing MP, Peter Baldwin, and the attempted murder of the undercover police officer, Mick Drury, similarly highlighted how sinister and well connected were the criminal elements.

In addition, public events involving individual transgressions embarrassed the government as it responded defensively rather than decisively. Bill Allen, who under political influence had been rapidly promoted to become deputy police commissioner, was exposed as having links with an organized crime figure and offering a bribe to a junior officer. When this was exposed, he was dis-

missed, but the government's deal with the disgraced senior officer was seemingly aimed more at containing embarrassment than prosecuting the issue. Later, Prisons Minister Rex Jackson was eventually forced to resign—but only after a long period of government inaction on the evidence before it for accepting bribes to release prisoners early—and made history by becoming the first prisons minister to go to jail.

Both episodes were accompanied by great political controversy where the opposition claims ranged from the just (Opposition Leader Dowd: "Organised crime is present within the Police Department of [New South Wales], at a senior level.") to the reckless (Deputy Opposition Leader Punch claiming that Allen had been a Labor Party "bagman"). It began a period where the opposition increasingly tried to make corruption an election issue. Their 1984 campaign slogan was "Together we can clean up New South Wales." Punch again was less restrained, saying a vote for Labor would be a "vote for a four-year licence for graft and corruption" (Turner, 1998, pp. 12-13, 27). Such diffuse, generalized accusations are very hard for a government to rebut with precise evidence or specific measures, and it was probably to avoid this type of damage that Wran had sought earlier to contain the issue.

The two most dramatic developments during this extraordinarily dramatic period however embroiled the premier directly. In April 1983, Chris Masters reported on the ABC's *Four Corners* in a program that transformed the politics surrounding corruption issues that Chief Magistrate Murray Farquhar had perverted the course of justice in a case involving Rugby League chief, Kevin Humphreys. Moreover, Farquhar had claimed to other magistrates that he was acting at the direct behest of Wran. A Royal Commission—which dominated the headlines for months and during which Wran stood down as premier—exonerated him of any wrongdoing but led to the successful prosecution of the other two (Masters, 1992).

A year later, the *Age* newspaper published transcripts from illegal tape recordings by New South Wales police, a surveillance operation that had been going for years against suspected crime figures. They highlighted in particular conversations between a justice of the High Court, former Labor Attorney-General Lionel Murphy, and Morgan Ryan, his friend of decades, now a solicitor for one of the most notorious crime figures, Abe Saffron, and a fixer in the murky world surrounding the selective pursuit of justice. This began one of the most dramatic scandals in Australian history, which only ended with Murphy's death 2 years later. Throughout, Wran was vociferous in the defense of his close friend. The public memory of the later Wran years is dominated by his extremely combative style in countering these allegations of corruption (Tiffen, 1999). At times, he lost his usual political judgment. As one respected independent member of parliament, Ted Mack, said after the *Age* tapes surfaced, "We have the most articulate and urbane politician in Australia suddenly reduced to hectoring and ranting, giving the impression that everything's got out of control" (Turner, 1998, p. 18).

Despite the political controversies surrounding the force, institutional inaction and an apparent incapacity to take seriously the scale of the problem marked the attitude of police commissioners Lees and Abbott. The appointment of Peter Anderson as police minister after the 1981 election brought a quiet determination to reform the force.

In October 1981 he set up a Special Gaming Squad to move against illegal casinos and SP bookmaking. Headed by Merv Beck, this squad made 1,026 arrests in three months, compared with five in the month before it was set up. (Turner, 1998, p. 16)

After Beck's retirement, the old patterns reasserted themselves. Such huge inconsistencies in arrest rates hardly reassured the public about the integrity of police procedures.

However, although often delivered under political duress, there were substantial reforms during this period. The most significant was the appointment of Police Commissioner John Avery, the first police leader to be effectively committed to eradicating corruption. His appointment began a prolonged, mainly subterranean power struggle within the police force, sometimes described in terms of white knights versus black knights. The power of the most corrupt elements was challenged with determination and eventually with success but only after many public dramas and many more private conflicts within the force, including death threats and the victimization of honest police officers. Within 2 years of Avery's appointment, 90 police officers were being investigated for corruption (Wilson, 1989). The single most prominent corrupt officer was Roger Rogerson. He was seen as in league with some of Australia's most notorious criminals and was eventually expelled from the force—although a convoluted legal saga lasting several years was to occur before he finally went to prison (Goodsir, 1995).

THREE ERAS OF PARTIAL REFORM, 1986 ONWARD

Since Wran's retirement, all succeeding premiers have publicly pledged themselves to reform. None has sought to minimize the dimensions of the problem. Both major political parties, guided by market research as much as ideology, are committed to strong law-and-order platforms and see effective policing by a noncorrupt force as a key part of that. The introduction of an independent Director of Public Prosecutions by the Unsworth government and especially the formation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in the first year of the Greiner government were notable institutional advances.

These changes in the political environment only partially penetrated the police culture. Commissioner Avery had succeeded in rooting out the most notorious centers of corruption. However, there was still widespread tolerance

of exploiting perks within the force. The more politically embattled environment in which police found themselves led to some demoralization but still with an internal culture that was protective toward corrupt officers. The centralized vertical corruption of the era of alliances between key police officers and major criminals was vanquished but was replaced by horizontal corruption. Widespread corruption still characterized the force but was less dramatic and more decentralized than earlier.

Although much of the political heat had gone out of the issue, there were still widespread allegations and expressions of discontent. In 1994, the independent member of parliament, John Hatton, initiated a Royal Commission into the police force. Thus began one of the most penetrating and cathartic public inquiries in Australian history (Tiffen, 1999). Over 452 sitting days, it heard from 640 witnesses. It attracted 140 submissions and generated 4,000 exhibits, with nearly 47,000 pages of transcript totaling 20 million words. It cost about \$70 million and had 170 staff at its peak. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* Web page's summary at the time, as a result of its hearings, 92 police were dismissed, retired, or resigned; 44 police officers received amnesty; 24 were granted indemnity; and 5 were granted immunity.

Media attention to the hearings escalated to a new level of intensity after dramatic evidence from hidden video surveillance began to be used from mid-1995. One formerly corrupt officer turned informer caught on film fellow officers taking bribes and talking about them in his car. In late 1995, the head of the Gosford drug squad was in the stand, having made a series of denials, when he was forced to watch film of himself and a prostitute taking cocaine and discussing how to distribute some drugs and pornographic videos. A succession of corrupt officers confessed and became informants, and news coverage was intense and constant. Eventually, Commissioner Lauer was forced to resign for having been negligent in his oversight of corruption in the force.

The Royal Commission's capacity to shock was not yet over however. In September 1996, a politician accused it of covering up pedophiles in high places. She named a judge who the next day committed suicide because his double life as a homosexual had been exposed. The commission was then mandated to inquire into pedophilia. Although it found no high-level corruption or extensive police protection, it discovered that abuses had been conducted on a far greater scale than anyone imagined. It found that major institutions, including the police, the Catholic Church, and some state departments, had been negligent and that on many occasions they had failed to act on victims' complaints.

The Wood Commission and its dramatic revelations of the extent of corruption radically changed the public climate and the political balance. A third era of reform began with the Carr government's appointment of a new broom, recruiting a new police commissioner from Britain, Peter Ryan, in 1996. Ryan had a much higher profile and was given more powers and certainly a greater salary than any previous police chief. He inherited a long list of reform proposals from the Royal Commission, a police force with clouds of suspicion hanging

over many officers, low morale, and major issues concerning its structure and effectiveness.

Ryan's early actions prompted considerable protest, especially by the police union, which organized a demonstration around the slogan, "send the pommie home." Despite recurring controversies, Ryan had the stature and mandate to lead a corruption-free force. To use a phrase from another area of modern policing, the third period of reform was marked by zero tolerance. For the next several years, the police commissioner was a great electoral asset for the government. Indeed, before the 1999 election, it prematurely renewed his very lucrative contract. This was not only a public endorsement of his performance but an acknowledgment of his public credibility.

However, the circumstances in which this occurred also revealed the political vulnerability of the situation. Despite his personal political views being conservative, because Ryan was seen as a Labor appointee, the Liberal opposition were targeting him for political advantage. Indeed, their threats to dismiss him had prompted Ryan's wish for a new, stronger contract.

When after much resistance it was revealed that he had become the country's highest paid public servant, earning about twice as much as the premier, the level of criticism mounted. Indeed, over the next few years, the perception of Ryan as a political asset went so sharply into reverse that in April 2002 Ryan resigned. This followed more than a year of media tumult and the unraveling of key alliances both politically and within the force.

Ryan's fall from grace with the government, although always publicly denied, was made abundantly obvious by a classic subterranean media campaign against him. It began in earnest with the appointment of a new minister, Michael Costa. The police commissioner found himself frozen out from key decisions, undercut by leaks and by pointed public gestures, including the appointments of his vocal critics, that demonstrated the minister's determination to distance himself and the government from the police commissioner.

Most of this concerned the continuing high rates of crime and in particular the presence of drug-related crime, especially among ethnic groups in Sydney's southwest. Some of this attracted heavy and dramatic if not always reliable coverage in tabloid newspapers, commercial television, and commercial talk-back radio. It also included a determination by the opposition to wring maximum political embarrassments from all such incidents and the increasing unity of critics focusing on Ryan himself. The government, rather than combat some demonstrably false accusations, thought that it was politically more profitable to demonstrate its determination to be as tough on crime as its critics (Williams, 2002).

Corruption was not a major issue in the reemergence of controversy over police performance, although Ryan said he feared that some of the reforms could now be rolled back with uncertain consequences. However, his fall demonstrated dramatically just how caught up in party politics contemporary policing now is. The politics of law and order is a potent element of the state electoral

contest. Both parties, no doubt soundly based in market research and a sense of effective public relations, are conducting an auction in their punitiveness against offenders, and all oppositions are determined to escalate allegations against the police to gain a partisan advantage. Ferocious controversies, including claims of corruption, will be a continuing part of the public agenda.

ORGANIZED CRIME ISSUES AS A MORAL PANIC?

The most common and predictable criticism by scholars and commentators is that the media merely scratched the surface, that what emerged in the news was only the tip of the corruption iceberg. This critical theme is certainly apt to the performance of the news media for most of the Askin period. Corruption allegations surfaced only sporadically amid a general ethos of quiescence surrounding the issue. There were isolated investigations and occasional political controversies, but the nature and extent of corruption was never authoritatively documented. It was a classic case where corruption reached further and higher and was more insidious than was publicly apparent at the time.

In some ways, the more interesting analytical question is whether the opposite scenario has ever pertained, where the problems of corruption have been exaggerated and public alarm was disproportionate to the reality. Such disproportion has been most suggestively encapsulated in the concept of a *moral panic*. The term was coined by Stanley Cohen (1972) to describe the social reaction to the conflicts between Mods and Rockers in England. Suddenly in the summer of 1964, various incidents that would have been largely ignored a year earlier were the focus for saturation media coverage. Scuffles between members of the two youth subcultures or acts of destruction by one or other group were now endowed with a much larger thematic significance. The coverage was self-reinforcing. Politicians, editorial writers, church leaders, and socially accredited experts further fueled the attention by commenting on the social and moral decline they saw as causing these outbreaks. The media were scouring the popular beach resorts for further manifestations, able to turn any deviant behaviors among these subcultures into major stories.

The term *moral panic* has become a common means of describing social reactions to deviant or collective behavior. It has been deployed to describe such diverse phenomena as media coverage of football hooligans and of new rebellious manifestations of youth culture, the persecution of witches in earlier centuries, the rise of McCarthyism and antimigrant hysteria in the United States, social concern about drug taking, and rumors about White slave traders and the disappearance of young girls (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Although usage of the term varies considerably, the defining features might include the following:

Volatility of reaction. Social concern about the phenomenon emerges very rapidly. Media attention does not follow actual trends in the problem's incidence, but rather, the social reaction follows its own peculiar dynamics affected by changing newsworthiness and the mobilization of concerned groups.

Moral absoluteness. The behavior undergoes a moral passage (Gusfield, 1963) where any ambiguities or compensating positive attractions are eliminated and it is seen as wholly negative. Newsworthiness and moral simplicity tend to go together.

Causality in terms of sinister agents. In a moral panic, causation is typically ascribed to powerful, typically anonymous, evil agents, or in Cohen's (1972) phrase *folk devils*. Institutional or environmental sources of the phenomenon are ignored.

Disproportion in projecting prevalence. Typically in such behaviors, there are few authoritative statistics. This vacuum is filled by self-interested projections. As attention to the problem grows, a stream of new details creates the impression of an epidemic.

Alarmist predictions. Even more license is available in forecasting future trends than in estimating current prevalence. The more frightening the forecast, the more newsworthy it is.

The recital of urban myths. Incidents, usually with anonymous but stereotypically appropriate identities, are recited as fact and widely believed although the incident on which they are based lacks authentication.

A self-propelling relationship between newsworthiness and vocal reaction. The public comments by authority figures and interest groups keep interest in the topic current. They use the opportunity of prominent media coverage to press their views, and the presence of such comments further enhances the newsworthiness of related incidents (e.g., Fishman's [1978] account of crime waves in the news).

Analysts have found *moral panic* a suggestive term for analyzing the surges in attention to social problems. It is a fruitful means for highlighting that social reaction follows its own logic, whose relation to the original problem must be treated as problematic and variable. There are occasions where there is political kudos and no penalty for inflating the dimensions of a problem, where judgments of newsworthiness and political expedience both push toward dramatization and exaggeration, and where politically attuned official agencies find it expedient to cater to rather than combat the public sense of alarm.

Nevertheless, there are inherent problems with the concept of moral panic. Most notably, it always carries a negative evaluation of the public and media reaction. It thus fits in with a common control strategy by which defensive groups seek to manage adverse media coverage, a weapon to deflate concern. For example, Horsfield (1997) found that following the exposure of the issue of clergy sexual abuse in 1992, church leaders used a moral panic paradigm to defuse the revelations, to suppress the experiences of a significant minority of laypeople who had so suffered, and to contain the challenge the revelations posed for the church.

Moreover, the concept of moral panics poses awkward epistemological issues, most especially to do with defining proportionality, with assessing what is an appropriate amount of alarm to express toward a problem. Application of

the term will always be contentious because it seems to undermine the seriousness of a problem. It is used most comfortably to describe social reactions the analyst sees as irrational. The perceived problem is more imaginary than real, based on fear of the new or different. It is used to describe—nearly always disapprovingly, sometimes sneeringly—the reactions of people who clearly belong to a different subculture than the analyst and his or her readers.

This is clearly not the case here. Even though its precise extent remains ambiguous, the problems of organized crime and police corruption were substantial and serious. Those people—politicians, police officers, lawyers, journalists, and academics—seeking to draw attention to it were overwhelmingly rational and well informed. Nevertheless, some aspects of the way organized crime issues figured in political controversies and were covered in the news raise similar issues to those associated with moral panics.

EXAGGERATION

Although for a long period the dominant media response was to underestimate the dimensions of the problem, once it was forcefully on the public agenda, there were incentives toward dramatizing the issue. For example, in May 1982 there was a surge of attention. Sydney's (then existing) two afternoon tabloid newspapers both paraded dramatic front pages. *The Sun* had a headline claiming that one politician received \$200,000 per week (a mere \$10.4 million per year), whereas the *Daily Mirror* had a series that began with the proposition that "Organised crime is the biggest industry in Australia."

Somewhat similarly, at the level of generalizations and gross comparisons there are not always easy tests for accuracy. Al McCoy, the academic who did so much to uncover the politics of heroin in Southeast Asia (1972) and then its growing importance in Australia (1980), has been quoted as saying, "Sydney became the last of the big, bad cities. . . . No city in the world could equal Sydney's tolerance for organised crime" (Hickie, 1985, p. 143). Likewise, reporters go to great pains and undertake great disciplines to establish individual facts but are sometimes prone to unqualified generalizations. For example, the distinguished journalist, Quentin Dempster (1992), began an excellent book on police corruption with the problematic general observation—"Before too much water passes under the Australian bridge, perhaps it is time to reflect on our pathetically corrupt culture" (p. 1). It is not at all clear that in comparative terms either Australia or Sydney is peculiarly corrupt. To the limited extent that comparisons are possible, they suggest the opposite (Heidenheimer, 1996).

Although the strongest source of exaggeration comes from unsupported generalizations, on occasion, the reporting of individual details can lead to a similar outcome. In police estimates of the values of drugs seized for example, Hall (1986) emphasized that although "much is made in the press about the street value of a certain drug haul," it is a misleading concept. "The street value puts an

extreme potential on a seized shipment and in a headline fails to convey the extent to which the profit is diffused into many different hands" (p. 139).

PREDICTIONS

Empirical discipline is reduced when projecting future trends. Sometimes of course these are made with a preventive intent, sounding an alarm to produce counteraction.

[The massive spread of organized crime] has reached the stage where this multi-billion dollar racket is corrupting people not only in the police force but in government and other agencies. . . . Unless some effective measure is taken to tackle it, it will take over the country. (Bottom, 1987)

Perhaps the key word in claims such as this is *unless*. Measures have been taken, and many would estimate that the power of organized crime is less now than it was when the claim was made.

This issue has been on the public agenda for sufficiently long now that some of the predictions and forecasts have reached their expected time of fruition. For example, almost 35 years ago, an American expert on organized crime advised the Melbourne police force about the likely growth of the problem:

The Calabrian *L'Onorata Societa* is well entrenched in Australia. It is already engaged in extortion, prostitution, counterfeiting, sly grog, breaking and entering, illegal gambling and the smuggling of aliens and small arms. Its infiltration and effort to dominate and control the fruit and vegetable business already has been exposed. Within the next twenty-five years [i.e., by 1990] their large cash resources and strong-arm tactics will enable them to develop monopolies in such fields as labour racketeering, wholesale distribution of alcoholic and soft drinks, the importation of olive oil, tomato paste and cheese, the vending machines business . . . pornographic literature . . . the corruption of racing and football . . . the monopolistic ownership of night clubs and taverns, musical recording and record distributing companies, model and theatrical booking agencies . . . building and road construction companies. (Dower, 1979, p. 243)

Fortunately, in none of the predicted areas did they establish a monopoly or even in most of them a substantial presence. Indeed, apart from their role in the drugs industry, they have not exercised power or established themselves in the wider Australian society on a large scale at all. The sweeping predictions have proved almost entirely wrong.

ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE MORIARTY COMPLEX

The tendency to perceive an exaggerated degree of unity and coherence among enemies is common in conflicts. In discussions of crime and social problems, it stems from a tendency to impose order on disorder, to picture a single,

centralized force behind disparate phenomena. The label the *Moriarty complex* comes from the first story where Sherlock Holmes tangled with evil genius Dr. Moriarty, in which Holmes imagined that “there was a single hand behind all the crime in London.”

The term *organized crime* has its own mystique. Its attraction is the promise of coherence, imposing order on otherwise inchoate, messy reality. Although criminals have organized and conspired together throughout the centuries, the phrase *organized crime* elevates this to a new explanatory power: “that behind the diverse phenomena of crime there exists a single, mysterious, omnipotent organisation which is responsible for much of it” (Morris & Hawkins, 1970, p. 203). Just like fears about earlier centralized threats such as international communism and papal plots, it seems to attribute to the Mafia “divine attributes such as invisibility, immateriality, eternity, omnipresence and omnipotence” (Morris & Hawkins, 1970, p. 206). This imagery of competence and coordination, apart from sometimes being deployed in a way that defies empirical testing, is often at odds with the reality of grasping, violent, and quarrelling individual criminals indulging in shortsighted and counterproductive behavior.

Sometimes analysts of organized crime have posited quite unlikely levels of control. For example, Hall (1986) criticized a statement by the chief counsel for the Costigan Royal Commission Douglas Meagher in 1983:

The rates for service of the girls seemed to be fixed Australia-wide, and although there is an appearance of competition, it would appear that the industry is well regulated. . . . All the evidence points to a major criminal organisation operating in [the field of pornography] and dominating it. It consists of the same people as those controlling prostitution. (p. 178)

Hall considered that any such picture of “an all-powerful organised crime network in Australia” is wildly misleading. He also pointed out the seductiveness of the *mafia* label for news organizations:

Mafia is a five letter word, which means newspaper headline writers love it; but there is more to the use of the word than typographical convenience. It has a rich background of references that have passed into tradition . . . a host of spine-tingling associations. (p. 76)

Although these points are all pertinent, others have correctly pointed out that by equating organized crime with an implausible caricature of a superorganization, such critics can be dismissive about probing the degrees of organization that do exist (Moffitt, 1985).

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

The concern with organized crime properly emphasizes the importance of networks of influence and covert coalitions of shared interests. However, in

attempts to describe such subversive alliances, the possibility of false accusations and of misconstruing the nature of the relationships is ever present.

The Costigan commission used the word *link* extensively, referring to some 173,000 of them. The use of this computer word without continuous, common-sense qualifications is dangerous (Hall, 1986).

Consider the following passage from investigative journalist Bob Bottom (1987) whose investigative zeal played a very valuable role over several decades in the fight against organized crime. Bottom was writing about the visit of two American crime figures at a time when there was great concern that Australian organized crime was developing international connections.

Investigations found that Dallas night club owner Jack Ruby, who shot Kennedy's alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, originally thought to have been a lone gunman, had worked in Chicago with interests associated with Allegretti and that 27 days before the Kennedy assassination, Ruby had telephoned Irwin S. Weiner, once charged with extortion with Alderisio in Miami and who, according to FBI reports, handled "all the skimmed money from Las Vegas for Chicago's organised crime community." Little has ever been uncovered on what Allegretti and Alderisio were up to in Australia. (p. 4)

This passage manifests some of the worst traits of the genre. Actions are invested with significance by gratuitous reference to more important events. The failure to find evidence is used to imply something fearful. Sinister constructions are placed on everyday events such as a telephone call, and the dazzling series of allegedly conspiratorial links disguises the insubstantial nature of each individual claim.

THE ALIEN THREAT

The preceding quotation manifests one recurring theme in moral panics—namely, that the foreigners are taking over. In earlier times, this has been expressed when police in one Australian city feared a new escalation because of crime bosses arriving from another city—Sydney to Melbourne or vice versa—and the media frequently seem receptive to a “local is better” storyline.

Immigration provided more ammunition for this theme. To a considerable extent, this theme finds sustenance in the peculiar conditions of crime in immigrant subcultures. Some of these communities—especially the Italian and Chinese—had traditions mistrusting police, and the language barriers and cultural distance meant that the police force were often not effective in penetrating crime within them either to help the victims or arrest the perpetrators.

[First- and second-generation Italian Australians] make up about seven per cent of the Australian population, over a million; but no estimate of the membership of the Society exceeds a couple of hundred, with associated family members adding no more than another thousand. If we take this highest figure, . . . only one out of every

thousand Italians in Australia is involved in the Society. Proportionately, there are probably many more dope dealers in the population of Sydney's Eastern suburbs. It is clear that only a fraction of the Calabresi themselves are involved. (Hall, 1986, pp. 4-5)

Hall (1986) further criticized a June 1981 Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence report on the Calabresi. Apart from several errors of fact and an unrealistic notion of hierarchical and unitary control of the marijuana market, he particularly attacked its tone, which "treats Italians as if they are Martians" (pp. 11-12).

From the 1970s onwards, a new variant of the theme of the alien threat emerged, namely, that Australia was vulnerable to international organized crime, in particular the American Mafia. In retrospect, these threats proved exaggerated, with overly large conclusions being drawn from the international links and travels of a few individual criminals. Although they generated great concern at the time, they were really another manifestation of the growing internationalization/globalization—of all aspects of our social and economic life. Nevertheless, the essential roots of crime and corruption remain reassuringly homegrown and locally controlled.

Although there have been problematic aspects of the way in which organized crime issues figured on the political agenda, to describe it as a moral panic is unnecessarily and misleadingly demeaning. The label is far too sweeping and dismissive of the critics of corruption. To talk of moral panics is also to underestimate and belittle the difficulties of reporting in this area. The growth of concern about organized crime as an issue in New South Wales politics from the early 1970s onwards included many landmarks of excellent reporting as the themes of official corruption and the maladministration of justice became a strong public focus. Legal restraints impinged sharply, and gathering evidence was very difficult—the difference between suspecting and proving is acute. Anonymous reporting, with epithets such as Mr. Big and Mr. Sin, may have been legally necessary but left the public bemused. The combination of mystique and anonymity permitted examples of spectacular but insubstantial coverage. Conversely, the vagueness of the term allowed evasiveness by those who had an interest in minimizing the problem: "Can you tell me where it is Miss Jones?" This was Police Commissioner Merv Wood's dismissal of a question about organized crime from ABC journalist Caroline Jones in 1979 (Steketee & Cockburn, 1986, p. 262).

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

The period under review represents a substantial political victory over corruption. It would be foolish to pretend that the victory is total or to predict

that large-scale corruption will not recur. However, the end result of the protracted political conflicts was that corruption now is much reduced compared with the beginning of the period. The political agenda surrounding the issue has been transformed, and critical media coverage was one of the reasons for the transformation.

It is likely that public perceptions of the scale and seriousness of the problem have not matched trends in the actual incidence of corruption. On the one hand, this disparity is not surprising because corruption thrives best away from public surveillance, when external attention is minimal. However, it does also point to the need to examine the processes by which such problems become visible rather than take them for granted. There were three major avenues through which corruption and organized crime issues became subjects of media coverage: dramatic individual crimes, political controversy, and judicial hearings.

Major crimes—especially murder and attempted murder—provoke outrage and attention in ways far beyond the usual offenses surrounding victimless crimes. They have often constituted the means of focusing on the larger problems of corruption, particularly when the police have subsequently seemed unable or unwilling to bring the perpetrators to justice. All highlighted the brutality of the corruption that gave rise to them. All seemed to highlight sinister connections. All became in the eyes of many a test of the bona fides of the police. Each new revelation or allegation was highlighted, and often speculation was allowed to fill the gaps in the evidence.

Secondly, as always in scandals, the most prolific coverage occurred when these topics became issues of political controversy, when allegations were raised in parliament and were accompanied by vigorous rhetoric. Often of course these produced more heat than light—with the search for truth falling a distant second to the pursuit of partisan interest. Controversy on this issue, as in most policy areas, is marked by sweeping claims, predictions that prove inaccurate, and rhetoric outrunning evidence.

Finally, judicial hearings are relatively easy for the media to cover, with each day providing a reliable stream of news. Although far from infallible, they also offer the greatest hope of authoritative verdicts on the issues in dispute. Criminal trials, especially while in progress, are bound by strong contempt-of-court provisions. The heaviest and often the most penetrating and informative coverage came with the Royal Commissions—the Street Commission and especially the Wood Royal Commission, which produced a more extensive and penetrating picture of police corruption than any previous inquiry.

However, neither singly nor in combination is there any guarantee that the peaks of attention from these three avenues of news coverage will correlate with the actual incidence of corruption. This is not to suggest that the news media were incompetent. Rather, it points toward the nature of the news enterprise. News coverage of a contentious issue over a long period is rarely characterized by coherence, consistency, or comprehensiveness. News is not good at giving a

sense of the prevalence of an occurrence or charting the extent and limits of problematic behavior. The horror of an event or a problem such as child abuse is vividly portrayed in a way that may convey a misleading impression of its prevalence. In 1996, pedophilia, a problem long neglected, suddenly received saturation coverage. Such an acknowledgment of a long suppressed problem often produces a rash of revelations. There were contemporary prosecutions for example of offenses going back several decades. The new opportunity for disclosure combined with the emotional revulsion at individual cases overwhelmed any sense of the limits of its occurrence.

Intensive media attention is inevitably accompanied by a strong predefinition of what the most newsworthy angle is. Journalists know in advance the type of story they are looking for. Even if the details remain to be confirmed, the likely frame for the coverage is already known. Journalists, politicians, and their staffs collectively constitute an industry continually generating its own shorthand labels and stereotypes, their own often gross terms for interpreting developments. *Asia* goes from *miracle* to *meltdown*. Similarly in scandals, sometimes the use of encompassing labels makes it hard for the accused to mount an effective defense. Even a label such as *corrupt* leaves many ambiguities that in a given case may obliterate crucial distinctions.

The most notable aspect of these scandals surrounding police corruption and organized crime is that—after more than two and a half decades of heavy media attention, after many political controversies, after several public inquiries—many central questions remain unresolved. This is not to suggest that we have not learned a lot. Much important information is now on the public record. But there are still crucial areas of ambiguity: What was the extent of the corruption? How far did it reach in the police force? What were its political links? In essential aspects, an important political victory over corruption has been won, but the precise dimensions of the vanquished enemy will never be authoritatively known despite the flood of attention to it. Neither is it clear that amid the continuing controversies and allegations, the public perceives or the media portrays the quality and extent of the change.

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