
Editorial The republican factor

THIS SPECIAL edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* publishes a selection of the papers presented at the Public Right to Know (PR2K) Conference in Sydney in October 2003. The annual PR2K conferences are a project of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at the University of Technology, Sydney. The 2003 conference was the third in the series.

The PR2K project is both wide-ranging and focussed: wide-ranging in that there are no limits placed on the professional or disciplinary background of the contributions from academic, professional and public participants, and focussed in that the project anticipates a renewed attempt to establish Australia as a republic in the not-too-distant future, where the question arises of whether or not a Republic of Australia should have a Bill of Rights, with clauses dealing with the various dimensions of the public right to know. Opinion polls consistently report that two-thirds of Australians support the transition to a republic of some sort. The Leader of the Labor Opposition, Mark Latham, announced in April 2004 that he would launch a series of referenda on the issue in his first term of office as Prime Minister, which might possibly commence after the national election likely to be held later this year. A plebiscite in the first year would ask voters whether they want a republic. A 'yes' vote would trigger a second plebiscite one year later to determine the republican model, which would then be put to a referendum at the 2007 federal election.

So the republican bandwagon may creak back into motion sooner rather than later. Latham favours a minimalist approach to constitutional change, and has rejected calls for a fully elected constitutional convention to determine the nature and extent of constitutional change. However, Australia is one of a handful of countries in the world that does not include a Bill of Rights in its constitution or legislation at either the national or state level (although the Australian Capital Territory House of Assembly did enact a statutory Bill of Rights in 2003). It is likely that there would be calls and perhaps a campaign

from a range of community interests to enact or entrench a Bill of Rights at the time of the referenda. It is imperative in the lead-up to such a campaign and discussion that the advantages and disadvantages of a range of statutory and constitutional models be explored. The PR2K project aims to explore these issues with respect to the various rights associated with the Public Right to Know, including freedoms of the press, expression and assembly, and rights to privacy and information.

New Zealand and some Pacific island nations have had experience with Bills of Rights, and a critical elaboration and discussion of this experience would undoubtedly be valuable for the Australian republican debate. For that reason, the ACIJ is grateful to Auckland University of Technology's *Pacific Journalism Review* for this special edition of the 2003 PR2K papers. It provides an opportunity to make direct contact with scholarly, professional and general communities that could make a strong contribution to the Australian discussion. In return, hopefully a republican Australia with an enhanced Public Right to Know ethos will provide another bulwark for democratic deliberation and development in the Pacific region.

At the time of the 2003 conference, the potential for an early resurgence of republican ism looked rather dimmer. Consequently, the articles in this edition are more wide-ranging and less focussed on the constitutional dimension, although the legal field of contestation over rights to know is well covered: **David Robie** examines two cases involving media regulation in the South Pacific – Fiji and Tonga, **Patrick Keyzer** examines the clash between indigenous land rights and freedom of the press, and **Mark Pearson** maps some changes in thinking on the Australian High Court about press freedom since Justice Ian Callinan was appointed to the court. **Rosslyn Reed** explores contemporary contests in the public right to know about science, while in a related area **James Arvanitakis** examines the concept of a cultural commons, and the stand-off between intellect and intellectual property. **Sue Curry Jansen** and **Brian Martin** argue that 'backfire dynamics' can have a tactical impact on free speech conflicts when attempts at suppression and censorship go wrong.

The ravages of international conflict, and their resonance on national political debates, continue to raise issues in media representation and communication. **Mary Quilty** and **Jo Gow** look at the difficulties of mounting advocacy campaigns on behalf of detained asylum seekers when they are isolated both physically and from communication, while **Annabelle Lukin**,

David Butt and **Chistian Matthiessen** present a detailed dissection of the ‘grammar of war’ in media coverage of the war in Iraq. **Marcus O’Donnell** continues the textual theme with an analysis of press reports of the gay marriage debate, while **Alan Knight** adds an historical dimension with a reprise and analysis of the radical press in Queensland in 1968, a year of international student and social activism.

In one of two commentaries from PR2K, **Quentin Dempster** focusses on how the ABC’s role as Australia’s public broadcaster is being further eroded while **Andrew Hewett** examines a concerted establishment campaign against NGOs and charities.

Among other *PJR* commentaries in this edition, **Steven Price** critiques the New Zealand media coverage of the war on terrorism, in particular the detention without charge of Algerian theologian and politician Ahmed Zaoui, and **Frank Sligo** analyses NZ’s journalism unit standards in the context of a debate about academic staffing at media schools. **Ben Bohane** provides an obituary for the remarkable Pacific film-maker and journalist Mark Worth, whose documentary on Papua, *Land of the Morning Star*, was broadcast by the ABC shortly after his death, and **Jon Stephenson** offers a tribute to one of New Zealand’s finest investigative journalists and publishers, Warren Berryman.

In the forum section, **David Venables**, outgoing president of the Journalism Education Association of NZ (Jeanz), poses some challenges to his colleagues and **Tupeni L. Baba** discusses ‘embedded journalists’ in the context of George Speight’s attempted coup in Fiji in May 2000.

Thanks to David Robie and Fran Molloy for a brisk and efficient publication schedule for these articles.

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Selections of papers from the previous PRK2 conferences were also published:

2001 conference: *Drawing Board* (2002):

www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/journal/0203/intro.html

2002 conference: *UTS Law Review* (2003)

www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UTSLR/1.html

The call for papers of the 2004 Conference is available at:

acij.uts.edu.au/pr2k/call.html