



## The Rise and Fall of IPRA in Australia: 1959 to 2000

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### Abstract

*The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) was established in 1955 as the lead international organisation for the development and promotion of public relations as a professional communication practice (L'Etang, 2004). Involvement by Australian practitioners in IPRA began in 1959 and became intensive during a 15-year period from 1982 to the late-1990s when a number of Australians took global leadership roles. Drawing from the IPRA archive and recent interviews by the authors with prominent practitioners in Europe and Australia, who were involved in IPRA's management and leadership, this article establishes the narrative of international engagement by the burgeoning Australian PR sector and explores the aims and effects of its involvement in IPRA. It concludes that IPRA's impact on the development of the Australian public relations sector and Australian influence on IPRA was largely ephemeral, limited to a decade from 1983 to 1993, and reveals some problematic aspects of industry practice and governance. Nevertheless, Australian practitioners made use of both the symbolism of international endorsement and international connections established through IPRA to transform the national PR sector from a predominantly local focus to an increasingly international outlook at a time when public relations services were expanding rapidly worldwide.*

Keywords: IPRA, PRIA, PR history, internationalisation

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## **Introduction**

The visibility of Australian public relations on the international public relations stage, both institutionally and individually, was very limited until the mid-1980s. Other than the operations of Australia's largest PR consultancy, Eric White Associates (EWA) that had offices in Asia (Sheehan, 2014, p. 9 –10), the only other gauge was membership of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) which formally started in 1955 (L'Etang, 2004; Watson, 2014).

IPRA was formed as a 'club' of members who were senior professionals who were respected in their nation of origin and active in international public relations work. This posture was reinforced in 1969 by IPRA founder and the year's President, Tim Traverse-Healy, who told the organisation's Annual Assembly in Dublin that it was 'an international club of PR men' (IPRA, 1969). Although IPRA recognised national bodies, it operated largely to validate the status of applicants. Long-term IPRA leader Goran Sjoberg said that one of IPRA's main benefits was 'creating personal contacts across borders' (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, 21 August 2013). Nonetheless, as Watson (2014) has demonstrated, it played a world leadership role in the 1950s and 1960s on matters such as codes of conduct and ethics and later on the formation of public relations education.

## **Methodology**

Following Watson's (2013) typology of public relations history, this paper has adopted an analytical narrative approach common in historical research. The authors have combined archival research, based on the IPRA archive held at Bournemouth University in England (Watson, 2011), and interviews with leading practitioners who were involved with IPRA in Australia and in Europe. Interviews were conducted with four Australian public relations practitioners and with four European practitioners (one interview each with former IPRA leaders in Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom).

Findings are presented using a periodization approach that identifies five key periods commencing in the late 1950s and continuing until the early 2000s, as follows:

1. Early international engagement (1959–1967): London-based Australians occasionally attended IPRA meetings in Europe; engagement was mostly by correspondence with little evident impact on IPRA or vice versa;
2. The Jon Royce era (early to mid-1980s): Melbourne consultant Jon Royce's efforts in 1983 led to the 11<sup>th</sup> Public Relations World Congress

being awarded to Melbourne for 1988. Royce was IPRA President in 1985;

3. IPRA World Congress in Australia (late 1980s): The 1988 IPRA World Congress in Melbourne in Australia's Bicentenary year was acknowledged as success and a significant milestone in the developing PR industry in Australia. Sydney consultant Jim Pritchitt joined IPRA's Council and then Board, after which Australian membership of IPRA soared;
4. Peak membership and leadership (early to mid-1990s): Pritchitt became Australia's second IPRA President in 1992. Australians took a lead role in development of the IPRA Gold Paper No.11 on Evaluation (1994);
5. Decline of IPRA and Australian membership and influence: From the mid-1990s onwards IPRA was beset by financial and governance problems. Affected by the organisation's very visible problems and declining reputation, Australian membership fell from a peak of 78 in 1993 to 25 in 2000. In 1999 IPRA awarded its 2002 World Congress to the island state of Tasmania, but it was postponed to 2003 and then merged into that year's Public Relations Institute of Australia National Conference. This failure symbolised the fading influence of IPRA within Australia and internationally.

## **Early international engagement**

The IPRA archive shows that the first female member was 'Mrs J. Bradbury, Qantas Empire Airways' [now known as QANTAS], who was elected into membership in 1959 (IPRA, 1959, p. 6). There is no indication of her nationality although the airline was (and still is) Australia's national carrier, so it is likely she was Australian. In the following year, two new Australian members (D.N. Gillison and F.G. Nicholls) joined and the Public Relations Institute of Australia was recognised by IPRA as the national professional body by IPRA (IPRA, 1960, p. 9).

Another early IPRA member was Noel Griffiths of the Rural Bank of New South Wales, the foundation president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). Griffiths was elected to IPRA's Council and served for two terms in the period from 1962 to 1964, but there is no indication from IPRA's records that he travelled to meetings. By 1970 he was no longer listed as a member. Because of the time, distance and, above all, cost of travel, Australian involvement with IPRA was mostly conducted by air mail correspondence.

Eric White joined in 1962, but Australian representatives in IPRA's Council were notable mainly for non-attendance at its meetings, although apologies were submitted. White's sole engagement with IPRA, as recorded in its archive, was to complain in 1967 that a letter had been sent

to him by sea mail and not airmail. Although the US consultancy group Hill and Knowlton acquired EWA in 1974, it continued to trade relatively autonomously and under its founder's name until the mid-1980s when it was renamed.

In 1970, when IPRA published its first membership guide, four Australians were members. This rose gradually to 10 by 1980. Among them were two future IPRA presidents, Jon Royce and Jim Pritchitt who joined in 1977 and 1978, respectively. Thus, in IPRA's first 25 years, the Australian public relations sector was barely visible internationally. Jim Pritchitt, writing in 1984, commented:

In general, public relations in Australia is not internationally-minded, witnessed by the small membership of IPRA by its 5,000 practitioners [23 members in 1984]. Involvement with overseas organisations is usually because such organisations have needs in Australia, not the other way around. Very few Australian consultancies need to seek client support from consultancies in other countries. However, as many companies operating in Australia are overseas-owned multinationals, work comes down the line – Australian consultancies work at the direction of consultancies from other countries. (Pritchitt, 1984, p. 36)

This lack of profile was confirmed by contemporary IPRA observers. IPRA's 1983 President Goran Sjoberg commented that because there were few multi-national companies with headquarters or significant regional operations in Australia in the 1980s, there was a 'subsidiary approach' in Australia that did not look outwards assertively (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, August 21, 2013).

## **The Jon Royce era**

This lack of visibility was soon to change. In 1983 Jon Royce, Australia's representative on IPRA, successfully bid for the 11<sup>th</sup> World Public Relations Congress to be held in the southern Australian city of Melbourne in 1988, his nation's Bicentenary year. IPRA's Council minutes recorded: 'In a secret vote by Council members, votes were cast for all three countries [the others were Brazil and Japan], Australia emerged the winner by a clear majority ...' (IPRA, 1983). That year's IPRA president Goran Sjoberg said that Royce's personality had secured the Congress vote:

His competitors gave very formal presentations so when he stalked in, his performance was so outgoing, so positive and he had such a well-balanced programme as well, so the

outcome was evident. Melbourne was chosen for the 1988 World Congress. (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, August 21, 2013)

Royce's outgoing persona, rather than the deep involvement of Australian PR on the international stage, thus opened an opportunity for his homeland to gain recognition. IPRA General Secretary (1984–88) Tony Murdoch said that Royce was 'very dynamic' and, when he became President in 1985, 'was very much on top of things' (A. Murdoch, personal communication, August 14, 2013). Another former IPRA President Charles van der Straten Waillet said that Royce 'was a fabulous guy. He was bright, he was charming and he was very entertaining and I had a lot of admiration for him' (C. van der Straten Waillet, personal communication, August 21, 2013). Sjoberg also spoke highly of Royce as 'a very strong character, friendly, professional, outgoing, influencing' (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, August 21, 2013). However, in 1985, Royce's health was failing and he died early the following year.

## **IPRA World Congress in Australia**

By then, an Australian committee to organise the 1988 World Congress had been established. It was led by a politician, Senator Jim Short from the host state of Victoria, and supported by Peter Maund and Jim Pritchitt (National IPRA Coordinator) among others. Again personalities were seen as important. Murdoch said Short had the confidence and political wherewithal to lead the Congress planning. 'He didn't have to prove anything. He was a Senator and ... I didn't feel his ego was beating through in any way' whereas Maund was 'constructive and helpful' (A. Murdoch, personal communication, August 14, 2013). Belgian van der Straten Waillet described the Australian organising team as 'all of them interesting people, broad-minded with a huge interest in international affairs' (C. van der Straten Waillet, personal communication, August 21, 2013).

Before his death, Royce appointed Senator Jim Short as chairman of the Melbourne Congress Organising Committee. Short's interest in and commitment to public relations and IPRA, demonstrated by his service as chairman of the organising committee, is intriguing as he did not have a background in media or public relations. Short had worked as a public servant in the Australian Treasury Department, before serving as Executive Secretary of the Australian Industry Development Corporation (AIDC) in 1973–74. In 1975 he was elected to the Australian House of Representatives as Liberal MP for Ballarat and held the seat until 1980. He was subsequently elected to the Senate (Australia's states representation legislative chamber) in 1984 and later rose to become Assistant Treasurer in the John Howard-led government in 1996, before resigning after

inadvertently misleading the Senate when he granted a banking licence to a subsidiary of ANZ Bank while owning shares in it. Some media reported that he was 'sacked' from the Ministry, but transcripts of his resignation letter to Prime Minister Howard and the formal statement from the Office of the Prime Minister of 13 October 1996 confirm that Short resigned and that he was found to have 'not acted dishonestly or improperly' (Howard, 1996).

### **'Not a major player'**

The state of Australian public relations, despite its personable flag carriers, was largely unknown externally. Former IPRA General Secretary (1989–92) and President (1996) Roger Hayes said that even by the mid-1980s it was 'not really a major player on the international PR scene' (R. Hayes personal communication, August 5, 2013) and 'international consulting firms hadn't even looked at Australia'. Although there were notable individual practitioners, such as Eric White, 'it was very much a one-man band kind of place, and certainly in the world of PR consulting' (R. Hayes, *ibid*). There were few corporate public operations of significant size, either, although there were long-established governmental PR operations at national and state level (Sheehan, 2014).

On the other hand, Sjoberg knew little of the Australian PR scene while van der Straten Waillet noted that later in the 1980s, 'there was a great academic interest in Australia for PR' and that practice was 'influenced by the US model' (C. van der Straten, personal communication, August 21, 2013).

### **1988 World PR Congress**

The 1988 World Public Relations Congress, in planning for five years, was seen as a successful event for delegates and an important step in placing Australia on the international PR stage. Charles van der Straten Waillet said that the Melbourne Congress ranked second only in attendance to the 1985 Amsterdam Congress and added: 'It was a really very good Congress...It was well attended and was close to capacity' (van der Straten Waillet, *ibid*). Goran Sjoberg commented that the Congress supported national interests: 'They wanted to put Australia on the map and made it a great success' and, added that 'the Australians provided us in IPRA with so much friendliness and social hospitality...it was good for us from Europe and the US to have a perspective from the other side of the globe' (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, 21, August 2013).

## **Peak membership and leadership**

In addition to Royce and Pritchitt, leading IPRA members in Australia included Sydney PR consultant Gerry Mulholland; former head of corporate affairs for BHP, Peter Maund; former general manager of public affairs at Unilever in Australia, Peter Dunstan; and Melbourne practitioners Frank Shew, Tom Flower, John Flower and Michael Potter.

A number of these early members are now deceased. However, several including Pritchitt and Mulholland, as well as a number of active Australian IPRA members from the mid-1980s, including Geoff Michels and Sheila O'Sullivan were interviewed. Their reflections, supported by available records, give insights into why IPRA gained popularity in Australia over the course of a decade (1983–1993), before losing support and declining to just 25 members by the end of the 1990s – and then less than 20 by the end of the 2000s.

There were 23 IPRA members in Australia in 1985, but this more than doubled to 53 by 1992 when Pritchitt took up the presidency, making Australia the third highest national IPRA membership in the world after the US with 152 members and the UK with 69. Membership continued to grow to a peak of 78 in 1993, supported by an active recruitment campaign conducted by Pritchitt that built on the awareness created by Melbourne World Congress. However, interviews with members revealed other influences as well.

Geoff Michels, now a semi-retired PR consultant living in Sydney, joined IPRA in 1986 and was a member for 25 years, including serving as a National Councillor for two terms, giving him an insightful vantage point to reflect on the organisation. The main reason he and other practitioners joined IPRA were the introductions and networking that membership afforded in other countries. Michels reflected:

If you were going to another country and you didn't know anybody, you looked up the IPRA directory and contacted some local members. And I have to say that IPRA members were always friendly and collegial. It was a way of making contacts and getting introductions internationally. (G. Michels, personal communication, 30 July 2013)

Michels explained that this was significant because 'in those days, most Australian PR professionals were not part of international companies or networks' (ibid). Major international PR agencies did not establish offices or affiliates in Australia until well into the 1990s or even later. IPRA

publications, such as its *Gold Papers* on best practices and policy, were also useful for practitioners keen to be abreast of international trends.

Sheila O'Sullivan, the founder and recently retired chairman of independent Melbourne consultancy Socom was an IPRA member for 22 years from 1988 to 2010. She concurred that international networking was a primary benefit of IPRA membership and added that this afforded tangible commercial opportunities as well as intellectual exchange. An example was her consultancy gaining access to new business after O'Sullivan met representatives of Swedish consultancy firm Kreab (now Kreab Gavin Anderson) at an IPRA conference in South Africa and subsequently represented some Kreab clients in Australia. 'IPRA was a key avenue to make international professional and business connections' (S. O'Sullivan, personal communication, August 7, 2013).

Several former Australian members also noted that attending IPRA conferences and arranging meetings with IPRA members overseas made international travel tax deductible. As well as defraying the costs of IPRA participation and making business connections, having business contacts in various countries around the world afforded personal benefits when overseas holidays were timed to coincide with business meetings and conferences. Given the high cost of international travel for Australians due to the long distances involved, the value of tax breaks was not inconsiderable.

References by several members to the cost of travel for Australians, as well as the focus on internationalisation, give clues to understand one element of the decline of IPRA membership in Australia. Cost tested even Michels' loyalty who recalled:

It became expensive, particularly because of the exchange rate of the Australian dollar during the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> This made membership quite expensive. Also, it was very expensive to go to conferences which were mainly in Europe. IPRA was quite European centric. (G. Michels, personal communication, July 30, 2013)

As a National Councillor, Michels petitioned Board members to introduce tiered conference registration fees based on distance travelled to attend. The proposal was rejected and, as the Australian dollar's value fell and local economic conditions tightened during the late 1990s, it became more and more expensive for Australians to travel to IPRA events.

Some former members, who prefer not to be named, referred to IPRA as a 'club', noting that the organisation had been established as a private



company with its secretariat in Switzerland, before moving to London, and cite this as a factor in its declining support. However, Jim Pritchitt said the organisation was not 'clubby' in Australia. He pointed out that the Australian National Council maintained representatives in both the major capitals of Sydney and Melbourne and actively sought new members. IPRA sought to reach out to Australian members through local councillors and coming to Australia again in 1994 to hold a Board meeting that coincided with the national conference of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) in Perth.

Pritchitt and O'Sullivan referred to the lack of strong national professional associations and institutes as a factor in IPRA's global success in the early part of this period, a situation that progressively changed during the 1990s in Australia as well as in Europe, the US and elsewhere. IPRA was able to undertake major initiatives because it attracted sponsorship funding in addition to membership fees (J. Pritchitt, personal communication, July 18, 2013). Pritchitt played a lead role in generating sponsorship income for IPRA during the early and mid-1990s, including directly securing sponsorship for publication and distribution of IPRA's *Gold Paper No.11* (IPRA, 2014) which was a pioneering discussion of the theory and practice of public relations measurement and evaluation in 1994<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the preface of the Gold Paper records: 'the main work was undertaken by the core committee of Chris Hocking IPRA/PRIA and Gael Walker PRIA (Techniques), Jane Jordan PRIA (Behaviour), Sandra Macleod IPRA (Media Evaluation), Anna Mari Honiball IPRA (Outputs) and Jim Macnamara IPRA/PRIA (Evaluating Departments and Consultancies)' under the chairmanship of Bill Sherman (IPRA, 1994), five out of the seven being Australians. Sheila O'Sullivan also worked with former IPRA President Sjoberg on a policy paper, *Quality in Public Relations* (Berth & Sjoberg 1997). She was also active on IPRA's Council and in the body's annual Golden World Awards (GWA) judging process.

Sjoberg has praised the Australians' internationalist involvement in GWA judging during the 1990s:

They were really good in those jury sessions. There was, in those years, a very strong Western dominance by which I mean Europe and the US and so we needed a balance, and our Australian colleagues worked hard to put a strong IPRA focus on their part of the world – not only Australia but also New Zealand, Malaysia, Japan and other countries. (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, August 21, 2013)

By the early 1990s, the Australian practitioners had moved on from the nationalist celebration of the Bicentenary in 1988 into a more outward

approach. Instead of the world coming to Australia, they were going to the world as public relations entered its strongest period of internationalisation. 'They wanted to liaise with Europe and North America, but at the same time they were trying to take a lead in let's call it the other half of the globe scene, which had been so dominated by the US and Europe' (G. Sjoberg, *ibid*). Fellow former IPRA President Hayes also noted the impact of Australian contribution which came from personalities but added that 'I don't think there was any sort of intellectual coherence to it' (R. Hayes, personal communication, August 5, 2014). By this time Australian PR practice had become, said Hayes, 'quite strategic and there were some very bright people in the business' (*ibid*).

## **Decline of IPRA and Australian influence and membership**

Although Hayes identifies the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Australian membership reached its peak, as a zenith in IPRA's support for the internationalisation of PR, there were storm clouds gathering on its horizon. A final 'nail in the coffin' for strong IPRA membership in Australia appears to have been organisational politics and a perceived lack of governance. Pritchitt was reticent to discuss it, but several Australian IPRA members recall that the organisation ran into financial difficulties from the mid-1990s. Ironically, the IPRA Council Minutes for its 1988 meeting in Melbourne recorded that the association's financial position was poor 'with reserves next to nought' (IPRA, 1988, p. 1). The financial position was dismal throughout the period of highest Australian involvement, despite the Melbourne Congress' success as an event. In this period, a full-time Executive Director was appointed in 1992 with an office in Geneva. The Minutes of Board and Council meetings show that by 1997, it was effectively bankrupt (IPRA, 1997).

Archive records of IPRA board minutes from 1994 report 'a very critical financial position' and records of a board meeting in Geneva in 1995 reported a deficit for 1994 of SFr151,000. A 1995 Paris board and council meeting reported 'the executive director to leave', to be replaced by a part-time appointment until a new executive director was found. Later the same year, a board and council meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia reported that IPRA was undertaking 'another review of organisational structure after exhausting its funds (by) employing an executive director in expensive Geneva', which prompted the move of the secretariat to shared office accommodation in London. However, the financial situation did not improve. Records of a 1996 board and council meeting in Mumbai, India reported that 'a major deficit was likely' and by 1997 the association's

financial position was reported as 'grave' with a debt of £85,000 accrued in the previous year (Watson, 2011).

Hayes and van der Straten Waillet, who were IPRA presidents in 1997 and 1998 respectively, recalled that they had to make 'some very, very drastic decisions' (Hayes, personal communication, August 5, 2013) to keep the organisation afloat. Allegedly, some international figures tried to point the blame at decisions made by Pritchitt during his presidency, but other Australian former members staunchly defend him and say that the cause of IPRA's financial problems lay with the costs of the Secretariat which was based in Geneva and then in London.

Reflecting on the reasons for the rapid decline in Australian membership of IPRA, Hayes points to strong personalities such as Jon Royce and the 1988 World PR Congress as particular circumstances supporting the rise, but suggested that this was unsustainable, pointing to Australia's isolated geographic position. Hayes said: 'Actually there was never really any strong engagement (between) Australia and the rest of the world. It's still seen as an outpost. I would say there were more (IPRA) links with South Africa over the years.' He noted that IPRA moved on from its 40-year-long connection with the Anglo-American world at this time and became more involved in Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Indonesia. 'Australia was not part of the process at all' (R. Hayes, personal communication, August 5, 2013).

Sjoberg considered that the decline in Australian membership was predictable and similar to his experience in Sweden when membership rose to 60 in his presidential year of 1983 but slipped back to 40 within four years.

Everything around the World Congress in Melbourne encouraged people to try IPRA membership...but it was costly to participate in conferences in other continents. So I think they more and more concentrated on regional issues with a national perspective and maybe that's why there were less people of Jon's (Royce) character involved with IPRA'. (G. Sjoberg, personal communication, August 21, 2014).

An anonymous Australia IPRA member said IPRA's financial and governance problems were widely known and had a big impact. He commented:

We saw a fairly tawdry period where the unelected treasurer and CEO refused an instruction of the Board and president to stand down pending an investigation into governance

practices and conflict of interest, instead installing a new Board and disbanding the Global Council. This saw both sides 'lawyer up' and became very unpleasant – which damaged the IPRA brand significantly. The issues were widely reported on PR industry blogs and news Web sites. (anon., personal communication, August 19, 2013).

This reference to blogs and website technology also identified another members' complaint that emerged towards the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s. Queensland PR consultant David Donohue, who joined IPRA in 2005 and served as a Councillor for Australia until 2011, said 'IPRA has not responded well to the opportunities presented by 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, unlike PRIA and other national organisations. Webinars, video conferences podcasts and so on are all a bit 'out there' for the 'old guard' managing affairs from London' (Donohue, personal communication, August 20, 2013).

That IPRA had only 25 members in Australia by 2000, and only 18 by 2009, after its halcyon days with 78 members in 1993, was most likely the result of a combination of factors, including a falling Australian dollar that increased costs, the limited internationalisation of Australian PR consultancies and businesses towards Anglo-American relationships that occurred from the mid-1990s and accelerated in the 2000s, the reorganisation and growth of the PRIA in Australia, IPRA's internal financial problems and governance issues and a failure to keep up with new technology.

## **Conclusion**

In the history and development of Australian PR, the decade 1983–1993 saw a dalliance with IPRA that illustrated rising national confidence and a desire to take a more outward looking international focus in line with internationalisation of public relations world-wide. However, for IPRA, the rise and fall of its brand and membership in Australia was an indicator that its period as a leader and trend-setter in public relations practice was coming to an end after 40 years, and also sent a warning to the industry of the importance of governance and professionalism.

Professional associations are often difficult to manage, with their ebbs and flows of membership as well as needing to find the balance between appearing as an established, legitimate organisation with offices and staff and delivering value to volunteer members. Throughout its existence, IPRA had a pendular swing between modest surpluses and financial problems. The period of greatest Australian involvement saw the largest movement of the pendulum, which was exacerbated by weak governance. This led to IPRA suffering from serious management and reputational problems that

resulted in an exodus of members. For the public relations and corporate communications sector, it is a case study that needs continuing consideration because of its damaging outcomes.

**Note**

*Australia's first IPRA president Jon Royce is honoured today through the Jon and Lynne Royce Memorial Trust Fellowship which provides grants up to AUD\$10,000 a year to a student to help them develop experience and knowledge in public relations.*

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<sup>1</sup> During the late 1990s the value of the Australian dollar fell relative to the US dollar, pound sterling and the Euro introduced in 1999, reaching its lowest point in history in 2001 when it was valued at 47.75 cents US (Hiscock, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> IPRA Gold Paper No.11, 'Public Relations Evaluation' was sponsored by CARMA International.