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"The Ship has Gone Down With the Captain" : A study of the framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Chairman Geoff Clark in The Australian

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"THE SHIP HAS GONE DOWN WITH THE CAPTAIN": A STUDY OF THE
FRAMING OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
COMMISSION (ATSIC) CHAIRMAN GEOFF CLARK IN THE *AUSTRALIAN*.

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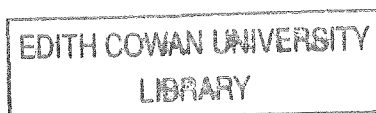
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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the frames used in the *Australian* newspaper's coverage of Indigenous leader Geoff Clark, from his re-election as chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) at the end of 2002 until the agency's demise in March 2004, and finds two divergent ways of reporting Indigenous issues. In summary, the Geoff Clark case study highlights the ideological divide between proponents of the so-called "rights-based agenda" in Indigenous affairs and those that favour the "responsibilities-based" agenda.

When established in 1990, ATSIC was viewed as a significant step towards Indigenous self-determination. With official federal government policy shifting away from self-determination to a focus on a non-symbolic issues (Ruddock, 2003), ATSIC's future was always in doubt. This thesis shows the *Australian*, as a leading proponent of the federal government's responsibilities-based policy agenda, has framed the perceived turmoil in organisation's Indigenous leadership and the perceived ineffectiveness of ATSIC as a failure of Indigenous self-determination.

DECLARATION

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A sustained interest in journalistic practice in relation to the reporting of cross-cultural issues and my own Indigenous identity is the basis for my interest in the reporting of Indigenous affairs and the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian media.

I currently work in the public affairs section of the National Native Title Tribunal, a Commonwealth Government agency that works to resolve native title issues in Australia. Native title law fundamentally changed the social and political landscape of Australia in the early 1990s when the High Court in the *Mabo No.2* case rejected the historically unjust legal fiction of terra nullius that stated that Australia was unoccupied land at colonisation. Native title was initially received irrationally as threat to an established order whereby Indigenous people would claim the backyards of suburban Australians (Meyers & Muller, 1995; Muller & Meyers, 1995; Meyers & Potter, 1999; Meadows, 2000). It was the media constructed fear and loathing reaction of the general public to an issue that just as easily could have been framed in social justice terms which impacted profoundly on my perception that Indigenous people and issues are often unfairly represented in the media and that this is a structural rather than a surface issue.

The complex history of Indigenous affairs is never afforded the prominence required for contemporary Indigenous issues to be framed in a fair and balanced way. Since 2002, the future of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) dominated the landscape of Indigenous affairs reporting. When established in the late 1980s, ATSIC was viewed as a significant step towards Aboriginal self-determination and self-management in Australia. A fundamental shift in Indigenous affairs policy was instigated by the Howard Government between 1996 and 1998, in which time the government rejected the policy of self-determination as it related to Indigenous affairs policy formation and replaced it with their 'practical reconciliation' agenda (Jonas, 2002).

The following section provides the background to this thesis by giving a short history of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and a brief biography of the agency's last chairman, Geoff Clark.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)

When the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established on 5 March 1990 under the Hawke Labor Government, it was expected to usher in a new era of self-determination for Indigenous people in Australia (Rintoul, 2003). Self-determination in this context relates to a policy approach to Indigenous affairs first adopted in the 1970s, at the heart of which was a devolution of political and economic power to Indigenous communities, giving them both control over decisions about a wide range of matters affecting them and also the resources and capacity to control the future of their communities (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1990). Self-determination replaced the failed policy of forced assimilation, which for Indigenous people dictated that they abandon their own Indigenous culture, often under duress through policies like forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families, in order to be absorbed into the mainstream non-Indigenous population (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997).

Assimilation has its origins in the so-called 'doomed race theories' of Charles Darwin and underpinned by the racist 'survival of the fittest' philosophy associated with social Darwinism, which claimed the least civilised societies would be assimilated into the most civilised (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 28). Australia's Indigenous population was nominated by Darwin himself as being high on the list of so-called 'endangered' or 'doomed' human races and the government was seen to have a role in 'smoothing the dying pillow' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 28). The philosophy of forced assimilation, which "was a highly intensive process necessitating constant surveillance of [Indigenous] people's lives, judged according to non-Indigenous standards", dictated approaches to Indigenous affairs until the late 1960s, when it became clear that Indigenous people would not surrender their lifestyle and culture to assimilate (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997, p. 34). Following the official rejection of assimilation policies in the 1970s, the self-determination approach to Indigenous affairs was carried on, in various guises, by successive governments over the next two decades and ultimately guided the establishment of ATSIC in the late 1980s.

The creation of ATSIC was an adversarial process for Bob Hawke's Labor Government, whose insistence on underpinning the philosophy of the agency as self-determination sparked fierce resistance from the Liberal Party opposition. There was more than 40 hours of Senate debate on the ATSIC legislation, which resulted in more than 90 amendments to the ATSIC Act before it was passed (Brennan, 1990). The future Liberal Prime Minister John Howard unequivocally spoke against the ATSIC proposal on the grounds that separate political representation for Indigenous people threatened national unity. On 11 April 1989, John Howard said:

> The ATSIC legislation strikes at the heart of the unity of the Australian people. In the name of righting the wrongs done against Aboriginal people, the legislation adopts the misguided notion of believing that if one creates a parliament within the Australian community for Aboriginal people, one will solve and meet all of those problems. ("In black and white", 2004)

Despite sustained opposition to the ATSIC Bill from the Coalition and the Democrats, the *Aboriginal and Torres Islander Commission Act 1989* was passed by the Australian Parliament on 2 November 1989, almost two years after it was first proposed by then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gerry Hand (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 20). When finally passed, the ATSIC Act was at the time the second-most amended piece of legislation to have passed through Parliament since Federation and contained a number of measures to ensure the new commission would be subject to "rigorous processes of public accountability" (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 19–20).

In principle, ATSIC was established to act as a partnership between Indigenous people and government to give Indigenous people increased power to administer their own affairs under the rubric of self-determination (Brennan, 1990). Inaugural ATSIC chair Lowitja O'Donoghue said that the establishment of the peak Indigenous body symbolised the start of a productive working relationship with the government of the day and also an opportunity for Indigenous people to develop greater strength and unity (Brennan, 1990). Symbolically, ATSIC represented a national voice for Indigenous Australians and political advocacy, albeit within the wider framework of a federal government bureaucracy with a core business function of supplementary service delivery of targeted programs to Indigenous communities. In practice, ATSIC was legislated to be one of the most accountable agencies in the wider Commonwealth

Government structure, prompting even early assessments that ATSIC represented "accountable self-management rather than self-determination" (Brennan, 1990).

Throughout its existence, ATSIC was often subject to persistent criticism about its operation and performance, much of it stemming from fundamental misunderstandings about ATSIC's role in the wider government Indigenous affairs portfolio (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 20). The Indigenous peak body has been routinely subject to a series of internal reviews and audits, in addition to ongoing scrutiny by external bodies like the media. Most recently, on 12 November 2002, Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock appointed a three member panel to review ATSIC's role and functions, which was predicted to recommend sweeping changes to the body (Schubert, 2002b). The review panel undertook extensive and targeted consultations with key stakeholders in Indigenous affairs and invited public submissions to inform the review (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 25). It delivered its final report to the Government in November 2003 – *In the hands of the regions – a new ATSIC* – which presented the Australian Government with four possible models to reform ATSIC (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 25). The report put forward 67 recommendations to suggest improvements aspects of ATSIC's operational culture, leadership structure and service delivery functions (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 25).

Prior to the completion of the most recent ATSIC review, the federal government fundamentally changed the way in which ATSIC's programs, grants and other funding would be administered. On 1 July 2003, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) was created as the executive agency that would make spending decisions for ATSIC to counter perceived conflicts of interest in the distribution of ATSIC's budget (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 19. Prior to the creation of the new agency, promoted as a 'separation of powers' measure by Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock, the elected arm of ATSIC made both policy and spending decisions – a situation that was unheard of in mainstream government agencies (Schubert, 2002b).

The central power structure of the ATSIC leadership is a board of 17 elected commissioners, headed by a chairperson and a deputy chair (Schubert, Rintoul, &

Maiden, 2004).The establishment of ATSIS was then Indigenous affairs Minister Ruddock's reaction to a series of allegations levelled against the ATSIC board relating to financial mismanagement, travel rorts, lost grant monies and forgery claims, which principally centred around ATSIC chair Geoff Clark and deputy chair 'Sugar' Ray Robinson (Kelly, 2003). The misappropriation of ATSIC's funds by board members was crystallised in reports in the *Australian* newspaper in May 2003, alleging that Geoff Clark has defrauded taxpayers by using public monies to fund a $31,000 trip to Ireland for himself and his wife ("In black and white", 2004). The travel allowance rort claims were one of many controversial episodes reported in the *Australian* concerning the ATSIC chairman.

Geoff Clark

In December 1999 Geoff Clark, an Aboriginal man of Tjapwurrong descent from the Framlingham Aboriginal community near Warrnambool in regional Victoria, became ATSIC's first elected chairperson (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 2002). Mr Clark spent three years as an ATSIC commissioner before becoming chairman and considered his appointment to the ATSIC board in the 1996 ATSIC elections as reflecting a swing to the political left in Indigenous affairs (Brunton, 1997). Geoff Clark, who was considered as a 'radical' element in Indigenous politics for his strong advocacy of Indigenous people's rights, was elected over more pragmatic reformers in the Victorian stage of the 1996 ATSIC elections (Brunton, 1997). Mr Clark's election as an ATSIC commissioner in 1996 provided him with a mandate to push an rights-based agenda through advocating the negotiation of a treaty and focusing on the advancement of native title rights.

Geoff Clark's election to the ATSIC board in 1996 coincided with the election of a conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition government at a national level. When the coalition took office in 1996, following 13 years of Labor Party rule, Liberal Party leader John Howard, in his first press conference as Prime Minister, immediately cut $470 million from ATSIC's budget ("In black and white", 2004). As well as cutting ATSIC's funding, the Coalition also introduced significant amendments to the *Native Title Act 1993*, which were largely viewed setting the scene for winding back gains made when the Native Title Act was first established (see Meadows, 2000). Furthermore, the Coalition government instigated a fundamental shift in the Indigenous affairs policy between 1996 and 1998, rejecting the policy of self-determination and replacing it with their 'practical reconciliation' agenda (Jonas, 2002). Practical

reconciliation is effectively a program of federal government funding that targets specific areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Indigenous communities, including health, housing, education and employment (Behrendt, 2002, p. 60). Geoff Clark once commented that:

> Practical reconciliation...[is] part of the politics of division, by specifically accentuating services to [Indigenous] peoples but not to others. In truth, the Government must provide these services in its duty of care as a government to all Australians. (Australian's for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2003)

Notwithstanding the federal government's opposition to self-determination, Geoff Clark continued to campaign on rights-based issues throughout his term as commissioner and became the first elected, as opposed to government-appointed, chair of the peak Indigenous agency in 1999 (Gordon, 2002). During his first term as ATSIC chair Mr Clark publicly built up a good rapport with political leaders, including Prime Minister John Howard (Gordon, 2002), sparking claims by prominent Indigenous figures that Mr Clark was "too close" to the federal government (Jopson, 2002).

In June 2001, Fairfax's *Age* newspaper controversially published legally untested allegations that Geoff Clark raped four women in the 1970s and 80s (Rule, 2002). The article by investigative reporter Andrew Rule, entitled "Geoff Clark: Power and rape," detailed allegations of rape against Mr Clark by four women, the most prominent of whom was Joanne McGuinness, Mr Clark's cousin (Rule, 2002). The report subsequently won the Gold Walkley Award for that year's most outstanding piece of journalism (Dodd, 2001). Editor of the *Australian*, Michael Stutchbury, who was on the judging panel that short-listed the article, said Andrew Rule's investigative report should be recognised as opening up the entire debate about "black male violence and sexual violence against black women" (Dodd, 2001). Former ATSIC chair, Mr Djerrkura, was named in court as the prominent Indigenous leader at the centre of sexual harassment allegations in October 2002 after legal action by the *Australian* resulted in a suppression order on his name being lifted by the Northern Territory Magistrates Court (Schubert, 2002a). In an affidavit lodged at the time, the *Australian* argued that if Mr Djerrkura was to contest the chairmanship of ATSIC in 2002, while facing serious allegations of sexual harassment against a female ATSIC employee, the public had a right to know (Schubert, 2002a). The affidavit also made its case for lifting the suppression order by arguing that Indigenous sexual violence was on the national

agenda due to the allegations of rape against Mr Clark, the incumbent ATSIC chair (Schubert, 2002a).

The *Age's* publication of the rape allegations in 2001 came only a month after Geoff Clark was involved in an incident outside the Criterion Hotel in his hometown of Warrnambool, described in the media as a "pub brawl" (Jopson, 2002). It was widely reported at the time of his 2002 re-election to the ATSIC board that Mr Clark was to face 19 criminal charges over the incident, but at the time he denied that the pending charges would make his chairman's role untenable (Jopson, 2002). In spite of the well-publicised rape claims, which the ATSIC chairman categorically denied (Gordon, 2002), Geoff Clark was reinstated as the elected leader of ATSIC in December 2002. Upon re-election, Mr Clark denied that rape allegations against him would be damaging to ATSIC, saying: "The fact is there may be allegations but that's all they are, they're allegations" (Jopson, 2002).

Geoff Clark had government support for a time, when in March 2002, Prime Minister John Howard defended a decision to host Mr Clark for dinner at the Prime Ministerial residence, The Lodge, when police were investigating rape allegations against the ATSIC leader (Saunders, 2002).The Prime Minister told Melbourne radio station 3AW that he was aware of the allegations made against Mr Clark, but didn't feel compromised in hosting the Indigenous leader for dinner, based on the fact that Mr Clark should be entitled to the presumption of innocence (Saunders, 2002). Indigenous affairs Minister Philip Ruddock affirmed the federal government's commitment to work with Geoff Clark when he was re-elected as ATSIC chair, saying specifically that: "I have always made the point about Mr Clark that he is a vigorous proponent of the interests of his people" (Schubert, Rintoul, & Wilson, 2002). However, the publicly articulated support for Mr Clark afforded by the Prime Minister and Indigenous Affairs Minister throughout 2001 and 2002, was less so by mid-2003.

The period from December 2002 to early 2003 was punctuated by a series of reports in the *Australian* about issues largely relating to accountability within ATSIC, which directly sought to implicate Geoff Clark and his deputy 'Sugar' Ray Robinson in alleged financial mismanagement and highlight ongoing legal proceedings against the pair ("Crisis of confidence", 2003). In July 2003, Geoff Clark was issued with his first 'show cause' letter by Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock, requesting that he outline reasons as to why he should not be suspended as the ATSIC chair (Johnstone,

2004). The Minister's letter followed Mr Clark being convicted of behaving in a riotous manner and obstructing police by the Victorian Magistrates Court during an incident outside of a public bar in the Victorian country town of Warrnambool in May 2002 (Johnstone, 2004). On 13 August 2003, Minister Ruddock suspended Geoff Clark as ATSIC chair on full pay, on the grounds that his convictions were a form of misbehaviour (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003b). A month after his suspension, Geoff Clark lodged an application in the Federal Court of Australia against Minister Ruddock's decision to sack him as ATSIC chair on the grounds that it was unlawful (Johnstone, 2004). Mr Clark also appealed to the County Court of Victoria against the convictions stemming from the May 2002 incident (Johnstone, 2004).

In October 2003, Senator Amanda Vanstone replaced Philip Ruddock as federal Indigenous Affairs Minister. As a result of Mr Clark's conviction on charges relating to the 2002 altercation at Warrnambool's Criterion Hotel, Senator Vanstone issued Mr Clark with a second 'show cause' letter on 23 December 2003, which was more severe than the first as it demanded Clark detail reasons why he should not be altogether sacked from his position as the ATSIC chair (Johnstone, 2004). Mr Clark subsequently appealed to the Federal Court against Senator Vanstone's 'show cause' letter on the basis that he was already suspended from his position in relation to the same conduct. To counter this legal action, on 22 January 2004, Senator Vanstone revoked former Indigenous Affairs Minister Ruddock's decision to suspend Mr Clark and then immediately re-suspended him on her own terms, justifying these actions with her 'show cause' notice (Johnstone, 2004).

Despite sustained pressure from the federal Labor Party and a number of Indigenous leaders calling for Geoff Clark to be dismissed from the ATSIC chair, Senator Vanstone sought to reserve her position on his sacking until the Victorian Supreme Court heard Mr Clark's appeal against his conviction for obstructing police during the May 2002 incident ("Vanstone decision", 2004). On 8 April 2004, the Court upheld Mr Clark's appeal in relation to the change of behaving in a riotous manner, but Mr Clark was still found guilty of the charge of obstructing police, albeit with a reduction in the severity of his sentence with his fine reduced from $2000 to $750 (Johnstone, 2004). The Federal Court case against Mr Clark's sacking continued, making it problematic for Senator Vanstone to sack Mr Clark until the case, which resumed in April 2004, was determined ("Vanstone decision", 2004). Ultimately, Senator Vanstone was not forced to make a decision on Mr Clark's sacking, as this

deadline would not pass before a critical election policy announcement by the Australian Labor Party triggered a response from the Federal Government that spelt the end of ATSIC (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004).

On 30 March 2004, in the context of a federal election campaign, the Australian Labor Party announced that, if elected, it would abolish ATSIC and its administrative arm ATSIS, and replace the agencies with a directly elected national advocacy body and devolve service delivery functions to regional bodies ("In black and white", 2004). Labor's policy was a 'framework of principles' rather than a detailed plan, being similar to what ATSIC itself, the ATSIC Review and the probable federal government plan were suggesting (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004). The policy announcement by then Labor leader Mark Latham was said to have provided the Howard Government with a mandate to abolish ATSIC (Grattan, 2004). At a press conference on 15 April 2004, Prime Minister John Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Senator Amanda Vanstone declared that ATSIC would be abolished with immediate effect and not replaced (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004). In announcing the move, the Prime Minister said that the "experiment in elected representation for Indigenous people has been a failure" (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was officially abolished on 16 March 2005, 15 years after it was legislated into existence on 5 March 1990 by the Hawke Labor government (Osborne, 2005). ATSIC's functions have since been 'mainstreamed' (funded through other federal Government agencies), reflecting the Liberal Government's policy that Indigenous people should not be treated separately to the rest of the population (Rintoul, 2004). It is important to note that the Federal Government's announcement to abolish ATSIC came less than six months after a government-appointed ATSIC review panel finalised a $1.4 million independent review of the Indigenous peak body that set out a clear reform agenda for the agency, based on extensive consultation with Indigenous people across Australia (Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs, 2005, p. 24–25). There was an expectation from those that contributed to the review in the 100 plus submissions submitted to the review panel and the people that attended any of the 44 meetings held around the country that these reforms would be carried out immediately. Instead, none of the suggested reforms were taken up by the Federal Government and the reviews findings were effectively useless following the announcement that ATSIC would be abolished with immediate effect in March 2004.

Significance of this study

Geoff Clark, as the democratically elected chair of ATSIC, was in a position that bestowed upon him the role of being the most powerful and most highly paid Indigenous bureaucrat in the country. The *Australian's* coverage of Geoff Clark's affairs intensified from mid-2001 when rape claims against him were reported in the media and as he was a holder of public office, this is not necessarily unexpected. The reporting of Geoff Clark's personal misdemeanours however, arguably became intertwined in the day-to-day reporting of Indigenous affairs, casting Geoff Clark as personally responsible for failings in Indigenous affairs policy that were actually a consequence of wider structural factors and governmental inaction in the policy area.

Arguably framing Geoff Clark and ATSIC as a scapegoat for failures in Indigenous affairs policy outcomes facilitated support for the federal government's rejection of the policy of Indigenous self-determination and a reversion back to mainstreaming the administration of Indigenous affairs.

Research questions

RQ1 – How were reports about ATSIC chairman Geoff Clark framed by the *Australian* during the course of the study? What was the dominant frame?

RQ2 – Have the terms of the debate surrounding ATSIC been set through continuing conflict-framed coverage of Geoff Clark?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation of Indigenous people and issues in the Australian media

Academic studies of media representations of Australian Indigenous people and issues have predominantly focused on the widespread and institutional nature of racist and stereotypical reporting (Anti-Discrimination Board: New South Wales, 2003; Bullimore, 1999; Mickler, 1998; Goodall, 1996; Trigger, 1995). The body of research relating to the role of the media in reinforcing negative racial stereotypes and now spans more than two decades (Eggerking, 1996, p23). Indigenous people in Australia have long held concerns over the ways in which they are reported on and represented in the media. The mainstream media is the primary source of information for the majority of the non–Indigenous population on issues relating to Indigenous people and also those of minority ethnic communities (Meadows, 1988, p. 142). Journalists working in mainstream media organisations thereby shape wider community perceptions of Indigenous people and issues and arguably have certain responsibilities in this specialised area of reporting. Recommendation 208 of the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody concluded that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people expressed disappointment and the media's portrayal of Indigenous people and issues. The recommendation further calls for the media industry and media unions to encourage formal and informal contact with Indigenous organisations, with the ultimate aim of creating "a better understanding, on all sides, of issues relating to the media treatment of Aboriginal affairs" (cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002, p. 31).

Journalists who predominantly work in the mainstream media are part of the dominant culture and, as such, many can be assumed to have only limited contact and knowledge about minority and Indigenous cultures (Eggerking, 1996, p. 23). Trigger (1995), in a study of coverage of Indigenous issues in the press and on talkback radio in Western Australia, argues that, through representation, the mass media actively constructs race relations between Indigenous and non–Indigenous people. Trigger carried out a survey on a random sample of homes in two suburbs that had reportedly been involved in race-related crime waves. More than 450 respondents were

interviewed, and asked specifically where they derived their "knowledge about the problems between Aborigines and White people" (1995, p. 118):

> (1)   mostly from their own experiences with Aboriginal people;
> (2)   mostly from talking with family and friends; and
> (3)   mostly from 'what I have read in newspapers, watched on TV or heard on radio'.

The most significant proportion (37 per cent) indicated that their information on this subject is drawn from the mass media. Despite only being asked to pick one of three options, 14 per cent of respondents chose a combination of these three options, with 11 per cent including the media option, indicating that at least 48 per cent of respondents receive their information on the problems between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from various media sources (Trigger, 1995, p. 118). Typically journalists have a tendency to represent minority and Indigenous groups as conforming to an existing stereotype, thereby reinforcing racist perceptions of the specific groups (Eggerking, 1996, p. 23). Meadows (2000, p. 84) argues that "it is the routine, day-to-day journalism with the steady repetitions of stereotypes and ethical breaches, which tends to set up a framework of understanding about race relations for audiences."

Journalists are frequently required to "cross cultural boundaries" (Stockwell & Scott, 2000, p. 21) in order to fairly report on issues in the Indigenous community. Effective cross-cultural communication ultimately depends on journalists employing strategies that will facilitate a strong working relationship with members of cultures that are separate from their own:

> Media workers should always be aware that their own values, beliefs and practices are influenced by their own experience of culture and are not the only 'right' view of the world. (Stockwell & Scott, 2000, p. 10)

A lack of Indigenous access to major news organisations, through employment and general participation in the media, is an ongoing issue and a major impediment to the fair and balanced reporting of Indigenous affairs (Meadows, 2001; Burrows, 2004). According to Mickler, "Aborigines were routinely (but not totally) excluded as authoritative sources of opinion and information until the 1970s" (1998, p. 153). On a structural level, Mickler (1998, p. 295) argues that "Aboriginal opinion does not quite 'exist' in the same form as other public opinion" as made explicit by a lack of

"Aboriginal statistical opinion" in shaping commentary and ultimately policy about Aboriginal people and their wants, needs and aspirations:

> although Aborigines have been the most statistically examined people in Australia, surveys to find out what they think, or want, are not part of the publicly available knowledge about them. (Mickler, 1998, p. 295)

Indigenous academic Marcia Langton (1993) posits that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people actively create, imagine and reinterpret 'Aboriginality' on a cultural and textual level. Langton argues that "inherited, imagined representations" (1993, p. 35) about Indigenous people are shaped from early colonial stereotypes that have become incorporated into everyday dialogue and discourse in relation to Indigenous people:

> These icons of 'Aboriginality' are produced by Anglo-Australians, not in dialogue with Aboriginal people, but from other representations such as the 'stone age savage' [and] the 'dying' race. (Langton, 1993, p. 35)

In Langton's words "Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists" (Langton, 1993, p. 33).

A recurring theme in the mainstream media is the representation of Indigenous Australians as "failures– unable to cope with the contemporary world" (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 39). Brough's (1999) study of representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in three major daily Australian newspapers from 1988 to 1998, explores this theme and concludes that Indigenous people are framed by their poor health status as a 'national shame' and an ever-present problem for the government and the nation as a whole. Critically, Indigenous health is framed within a media discourse of failure, which employs metaphors of shame, comparisons with third world countries, implicit and more overt references to Indigenous people being grounded in traditional society and outside of modern Australian society, a focus on fatalism, attributions of individual blame over structural inequality and a foregrounding the 'otherness' of the Indigenous population to normalise the health of the rest of Australia. Furthermore, Brough states that a social narrative that emerges when viewing the overall picture is that Indigenous people are: "'Australian enough' to bring international embarrassment, but not 'Australian enough' to have achieved a healthy lifestyle" (1999, p. 97). By representing Indigenous Australians as outside of society and representing them as 'the other,' they

remain as objects of marginalisation and are structured in prevalent discourse as distinct from mainstream society.

Journalism and the reporting of Indigenous issues: the Australian context

In the 1990s, a series of key events shaped the landscape of Indigenous affairs reporting in Australia. These included the handing down of the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, the *Mabo v Queensland (no. 2)* native title High Court decision that paved the way for the Native Title Act 1993 and the 1996 amendments to the Native Title Act, the rapid rise of politician Pauline Hanson and her brand of conservative populism and the release of the *Bringing them home* report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families in 1997. These events were framed within the context of a decade-long formal process of reconciliation. For ten years from 1991, the 25-member Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) existed under a statutory agreement to advance the cause of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In the year 2000, the council formally concluded its statutory life with a final report that effectively shaped the direction of subsequent debates about reconciliation in Australia. Burrows' (2004) study comparing mainstream and Indigenous media coverage of reconciliation concludes that reducing reconciliation to an Indigenous specific issue, which an overwhelming number of reports effectively did, is counterproductive:

> Ultimately, journalists and the community as a whole must begin to see issues such as reconciliation as relating to all Australians. The media's consistent presentation of such issues as Indigenous problems negates the responsibility of the wider community. (Burrows, 2004, p. 187)

The creation of Indigenous-specific issues through the mainstream media includes examples like the negotiation of a treaty, land rights, the reconciliation process, Aboriginal deaths in custody and native title. Framing these issues as 'Indigenous specific' places the onus upon Indigenous people to resolve them, when in reality many of these issues relate to broader discourses about the nation and the continuing negotiation of the role of Indigenous people in Australian society.

The year 1988 marked 200 years of white British settlement – Australia's Bicentenary – and represents a critical stage in the history of the nation. A study by Meadows (2001) of media coverage of Indigenous viewpoints on the celebratory

discourse surrounding the bicentennial year is a case in point that highlights the position of Indigenous people in the construction of national identity in Australia. Meadows' in-depth study of media coverage of Indigenous perspectives on the bicentenary in the lead up to Australia Day commemorations on 26 January 1988, identifies that the event was framed in terms of a conflict between the "different concepts of national identity" (2001, p. 70) held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Australia Day was re-framed by the Indigenous community as 'Invasion day,' to counter-frame the dominant discourse of celebrating a nation and focusing attention on Indigenous rights during the event (Meadows, 2001, p. 72):

> the terms "Invasion Day" or "Australia Day" transmitted different messages about the bicentenary, depending on the context in which they were used. The first contradicts the dominant discourse that frames Australia as terra nullius and the need for the celebration of a nation. The second reinforces the dominant view that Australia began as a nation in 1788. (Meadows, 2001, p. 79)

Indigenous people, in the context of the bicentenary, publicly told their stories of past and continuing experiences of dispossession, victimisation and inequality. In the lead up to Australia Day 1988, the news media wrongly interpreted this Indigenous discontent by suggesting that Indigenous people could incite violent protests (Meadows, 2000, p. 87), as suggested by Eggerking (1996, p. 23): "one powerful stereotype of Indigenous people is that they are criminals, protestors or victims." Meadows (2000) suggests that the media, in privileging a celebratory discourse during the bicentenary, effectively suppressed and delegitimised calls by Indigenous people to observe their reasons for discontent of this significant nation–building event.

The perpetuation of historically grounded race–based stereotyping of Indigenous Australians throughout the nation's mass media has led to the institutionalisation of common frames to interpret Indigenous issues in the public and media spheres (Ross, 2003). McCallum (2003) examines the issue of reconciliation to draw conclusions on the manner in which the public engage with media frames and adapt aspects of these frames to make sense of a broader concept. McCallum (2003, p. 126–127) identifies frames of responsibility, history, identity and racism as key frames used by the public to interpret Indigenous issues generally, also adding that personal experiences, myths and stereotypes were employed to engage with debates surrounding the broader issue of reconciliation. Jakubowicz (1994) argues that, despite the constant presence of

Indigenous issues in the media, they remain excluded from core discourses about the construction of national identity:

> The absence of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and ethnic minorities from the centre of discourses about the nation suggest that our first task concerning national identity and representation should be to examine what is said about the nation. (Jakubowicz (Ed.), 1994, p. 53)

Placed within the context of broader analytical frameworks based on the principles of citizenship and the public sphere, Hartley and McKee (2000, p. 12) have theorised that it is the "unresolved national status of Indigenous people" in Australia that has led to an over-representation of Indigenous issues in the media. The theoretical basis for this position is that Indigenous people represent an aspect of Australian identity that remains as a site of contestation and uncertainty and more specifically, they are the bearers of discourses of race in Australia (Hartley & McKee, 2000, p. 64).

Meadows (2000) in a study of newspaper coverage of more than 100 articles, features, opinion pieces and editorials relating to native title during the study period of June–July 1993, concluded that Indigenous voices made up just 27 per cent of all opinion sought in June and 14 per cent in July (Meadows, 2000, p. 140). In terms of the native title debate, Indigenous people were arguably the primary group to be affected by the implications of the native title legislation, yet the media favoured non–Indigenous sources. Meadows (2000, p. 138) found that the trends showing that Indigenous voices in the debate halved from June to July could be attributed to increased reporting of oppositional voices from the mining sector and the pastoral industry to native title, thus pushing aside Indigenous comment. The marginalisation of Indigenous voices in the media works to severely undermine their legitimacy and destabilises their attempts to influence public opinion.

Frames

Framing analysis, which will be looked at in greater detail under methodology, is particularly useful to apply to studies of the representation of Indigenous Australians in the mass media, due to the continuing centrality of Indigenous affairs in the public domain. Journalists adopt and use frames in media texts to organise their ideas to structure social meaning (Reese, 2001, p. 14). Through frames, journalists and media institutions shape the wider public's perception of various issues that, in the Australian context, frequently includes representations of Indigenous people and issues.

Meadows (2000, p. 208) described the framing of Indigenous people and their affairs in Australia's mainstream media as "narrow and predictable". In the context of Indigenous affairs reporting, there is a noted lack of Indigenous voices in mainstream news coverage of Indigenous issues (see Meadows, 2000; Meadows, 2001; Burrows, 2004). As a result, frames play a key role as interpretive structures to construct meanings and make sense of what is at issue:

> The absence of Aboriginal voices interpreting 'news' about Aboriginal issues does not leave a vacuum of interpretive guidelines for audiences. Several powerful and persistent 'frames' of expectation about what news relating to Aborigines will be about are evident in how stories about Aboriginal politics are constructed, and how they are interpreted varies from audience to audience. (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 85)

A consequence of the reinforcement of historically grounded race–based stereotyping of Indigenous Australians throughout the nation's mass media is the institutionalisation of common frames to interpret Indigenous issues in the media. Reconciliation was a prominent issue in the Australian media for a decade throughout the 1990s, yet the concept ultimately did not achieve its own media frame during this time, leading to its virtual disappearance from media coverage of Indigenous issues by 2001 (McCallum, 2003, p. 119). McCallum (2003) attributes this to the fact that issue of reconciliation was never clearly defined and therefore became reported within the framework of other more prominent or newsworthy issues in the Indigenous affairs landscape.

Langton (1993, p. 29) ironically suggests that perhaps "Aboriginal affairs is the longest 'race' experiment in history," in reference to the intensification of colonial, and later governmental, administration over the affairs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from 1788 to the present day. Mickler (1998) argues that the daily routine reporting of, often banal, Indigenous issues results in the Indigenous population being subject to media coverage on a disproportionate scale. Reporting of these everyday issues reinforces the overall prominence of Indigenous affairs, specifically drawing attention to the close relationship between Indigenous people and the state that has developed across time due to the status of Indigenous people as embodying a unique domain of government policy since early settlement (Mickler, 1998, p. 211). In conjunction with the visibility of perceived 'special treatment' that Indigenous people receive and routine reporting of targeted government assistance for Indigenous people, Mickler (1998, p. 211) suggests that the visibility in the media of Indigenous and

government relations feed a discourse of 'Aboriginal privilege' that has risen to become a prominent news frame in wider media discourses about Indigenous people in recent times.

Inherent in these discussions about 'Aboriginal privilege' is Indigenous people's 'right' to be equal, but as Meadows has written, this implies that Indigenous people have received some undeserved advantages or privileged treatment (Meadows, 2000, p. 202). The mainstream media reports that Indigenous people receive special or privileged treatment, yet social indicators demonstrate unambiguously that these same people are the most disadvantaged in Australian society (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise only 2.4 per cent of the total Australian population, yet Indigenous people generally experience higher levels of economic and social disadvantage, poor health, unemployment, contact with the criminal justice system and physical or threatened victimisation than the mainstream population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). The frame of privilege, specifically concerning perceived benefits Indigenous people receive that non–Indigenous people do not, fails to take into account the requirement to redress the balance between the comparative social disadvantage that Indigenous people suffer when compared with the dominant population. Another frame, that of "equality" builds on a view that all people should be treated 'equally,' is a means by which the privilege frame is justified and suggestions of structural inequality are delegitimised.

The discourse of 'Aboriginal privilege' originated from an increase in Aboriginal political agency in the 1970s, which represented the beginnings of Indigenous people being portrayed as "acknowledged political actors" (Mickler, 1998, p. 198) in the mass media. Debates over land rights in the popular media saw the maturation of the discourse of Aboriginal privilege in the 1980s (Mickler, 1998, p .198). A rise in politically conservative ideologies, beginning with the election of a conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition Government in 1996 and the rise of conservative populism with Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, consolidated this discourse in the 1990s (Mickler, 1998, p.198). The most overt manifestation of this discourse was in Independent MHR for Oxley Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to Federal Parliament on 10 September 1996:

> Present governments are encouraging separatism in Australia by providing opportunities, land, moneys and facilities available only to Aboriginals...I am fed up to the back teeth with the inequalities that are being promoted by the

government and paid for by the taxpayer under the assumption that Aboriginals are the most disadvantaged people in Australia. I do not believe that the colour of one's skin determines whether you are disadvantaged. (Hanson, 1996)

Pauline Hanson (1996) goes on to allude to "the privileges Aboriginals enjoy over other Australians" and her concerns that targeted government assistance to Indigenous people applies "a type of reverse racism" to mainstream Australians "by those who promote political correctness." Fundamentally, Hanson (1996) promoted a discourse of "equality", which carries the implication that Indigenous people have enjoyed underserved advantages over other Australians. Nelson and Willey (2001, p. 248) refer to "group centred frames" as those that privilege or foreground prejudices and biases based on racial, ethic or cultural characteristics of groups in society. Group centred frames typically prime audiences to consider social issues in the context of their pre-existing knowledge, beliefs and assumptions about the social group involved, instead of reflecting on the issue in other ways. To frame 'affirmative action' as "reverse discrimination" for example, in the way demonstrated by Hanson (1996), brings about a different consideration of the issue than if it were to be framed as "undeserved advantage" (Nelson & Willey, 2001, p. 248).

McCallum (2003) identified a shift in the framing of Indigenous issues in the media at the conclusion of the statutory life of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) in the year 2000, which signalled the finalisation of a ten-year formal reconciliation process in Australia. Reconciliation in a symbolic sense had disappeared from media coverage by 2001 and was replaced by the Howard Government's "practical reconciliation" agenda, which instigated a move away from symbolic reconciling of issues to a focus on the everyday issues that affect Indigenous communities (Ruddock, 2003). Arguably, the void left by the shifting of the symbolic reconciliation agenda has been replaced in the media by scandals surrounding the perceived failure of the Indigenous leaders within ATSIC. Critically, government responsibility for Indigenous affairs was absolved by virtue of ATSIC's existence and failures in the ATSIC administration and leadership are framed by the media as wider systemic failures in the improvement of the lives of Australia's Indigenous population. Ultimately, the debate about the ATSIC leadership is another case in point which highlights the disengagement of Indigenous people from wider debates about issues that are framed by the media as 'Indigenous specific.' Native title, as demonstrated by Meadows (2000) in his comparative study of coverage of native title in Australia and Canada, has been framed as a threat from the early 1990s when native title rights were reported in the mainstream

as a disruption to the social order in Australia. A series of monographs examine in further detail the reporting of major stages in the development of native title legislation in Australia and the ways in which the powerful mining, pastoral and commercial development lobbies succeeded setting an agenda in the media to gain legitimacy and discredit Indigenous voices in the debate or exclude them altogether (Meyers & Muller, 1995; Muller & Meyers, 1995; Meyers & Potter, 1999).

Gaps in the literature

Hartley and McKee (2000) have proposed that the challenge for researchers in their field of inquiry is to go beyond reducing complex issues surrounding media coverage of Indigenous affairs simply to studies of media racism and bias. Similarly Mickler (1998) advocates a move away from explanatory frameworks that privilege 'cultural difference' as the justification for accepting that reporting of Indigenous affairs is biased and detrimental to race relations in Australia. Framing research is a particular field of inquiry that can assist in uncovering instances of bias within the context of reporting an issue, but critically framing differs from the objectivity and bias paradigm that has dominated communications studies since the 1950s (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). Framing research has only been used in a limited manner in studies of media representation of Indigenous people and issues in Australia so there are few grounds for comparison (see Meadows 2000 & McCallum, 2003). Framing research is in itself a contested paradigm, though in time it has the potential to become an all–encompassing theory of communication that could be adopted by researchers in studying media framing of Indigenous issues.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Framing is emerging as an alternative theoretical framework to media racism and bias paradigm that has dominated studies of the representation of Indigenous people in the media and the reporting of Indigenous issues. Schudson (2003) notes that a consideration of framing, rather than bias, makes it possible to examine the ways in which journalists draw on routines and established frames to report issues, rather than just reading evidence of selection as evidence of intentional bias or the prejudices of individual journalists (Schudson, 2003, p. 37). Framing analysis, writes Reese (2001, p. 9) deviates from the objective standard of a focus on bias in media studies to consider the "ideological character" of news.

What is framing?

Framing as it is applied in journalism studies has been adapted from sociological theories developed in the 1970s by Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson in their consideration of how people define and make sense of their everyday social experience through the framing process (Reese, 2001). Tuchman's (1978) seminal media sociology text, *Making news*, is largely credited with linking this initial sociological research about frames and their role in the production of meaning and in organising experiences to "broader structural and ideological processes" involving journalists, their sources and news organisations (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216). In his oft-cited definition, Entman (1993) describes framing in the following terms:

> To frame is to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Framing is the way in which media, media professionals, and their audiences organise and make sense of issues (Reese, 2001, p. 7). Critically, framing "recognises the ability of a text – or a media presentation – to define a situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate" (Tankard, 2001, p. 96).

Framing, particularly in the field of political communication, has been closely linked with agenda-setting theory and has been described as "second level," or "attribute" agenda-setting (Maher, 2001; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). There is active critical debate about reducing framing to a stage or component of agenda-setting, as agenda-setting focuses on the salience of an issue rather than how issues are initially defined (Reese, 2001, p. 8). In opposition with agenda-setting, which investigates the transfer of issue salience from the mass media to the public, framing is particularly concerned with emphasising the selection and salience of particular aspects of an issue, rather than the issue itself (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107). Salience refers to the primacy or importance ascribed to an issue or problem through frames and the framing process in the media. While media salience is considered the critical independent variable in agenda-setting research, in framing analysis, it is but one element of a wider schema in which to make sense of underlying issues (Kiousis, 2004, p. 71). Ultimately, the perceived convergence of framing and agenda-setting is rejected by some framing researchers on the basis that framing, unlike agenda-setting, has the potential to become an all-encompassing theory of communication.

What are frames?

Reese (2001) defines frames as "organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001, p. 11). In line with his definition of the process of framing, Entman (1993) posits that frames function in four distinct ways in that they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies or courses of action. Frames are said to be a product of both news values and journalistic practices and conventions (McLeod & Detenber, 1999, p. 6) and organise news stories by their "patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion" (Carragee and Roefs, 2004, p. 216)

Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe a news media frame as a "cognitive device used in information encoding, interpreting, and retrieving" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). In a cognitive sense, frames exist as prior knowledge, which individuals use to process and define information conveyed in news frames and, on an interpersonal level, use to discuss issues (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 873). Frames must be shared in a society in order to be communicable and are said to "connect our collective knowledge of disparate moments" (Durham, 1998, p104). More broadly, frames operate within the routines and discourses of social groups (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 873). Tankard (2001, p.

96) interprets the cognitive dimension of framing as addressing beliefs about objects as well as attitudes. Hertog and McLeod (2001, p. 141), however, define frames as a cultural, rather than cognitive phenomena, that possess symbolic culturally privileged narratives, metaphors and myths that carry a shared meaning throughout a society.

Issue frames describe social policies and problems and shape public understanding of how the problem came to be and the important criteria by which policy solutions should be evaluated (Nelson & Willey, 2001, p. 247). According to Iyengar (1991), "episodic" and "thematic" frames are most commonly used in coverage of social issues, especially those that spark protracted public debate. Episodic reports are events-driven, while thematic reporting is more analytical, taking information from different points in time to provide a context for the interpretation of an issue (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). Audiences ascribe responsibility for problems differently according to the framing approach adopted. In Iyengar's assessment, audiences relate episodic frames to individual responsibility whereas thematic frames suggest more systemic causes are responsible for a given problem (Iyengar, 1991). Fundamentally, these frames gain complexity over the course of an issue and are persistent over time (Reese, 2001, p15).

How are frames detected?

Approaches to detecting frames and framing in media texts vary. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, p. 94) suggest there are two broad approaches to content analysing frames in the news: the inductive approach and the deductive approach. The later approach assumes that the researcher will have a clear idea of the kind of frames likely to be in the news, so as not to overlook key frames prior to undertaking a factual study. The deductive approach can be easily replicated, can accommodate large sample sizes and can detect differences in framing between media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). The inductive approach, used most prominently by Tankard (2001), involves the development of a list of frames as widely expansive as to cover as many of the possible ways in which an event, issue or problem can be framed. The "list of frames" approach can be difficult to replicate and has been found to produce high levels of disagreement when several people are involved in the coding process (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). Whereas a deductive approach will predefine a set of frames to act as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news, the list of frames approach is more expansive and inclusive.

Journalism and framing

At the heart of framing research is an examination of the role of the journalist as framer (Maher, 2001, p. 88). Journalists adopt and use frames in media texts to organise their ideas to structure social meaning (Reese, 2001, p. 14). Five factors are said to influence the way in which an issue will be framed by a journalist, including: social norms and values, organisational pressures and restraints, pressures of interest groups, ideological or political orientations of journalists and, most critically, journalistic routines and practices (Scheufele, 1999, p. 191). Framing analysis reveals that media portrayals of specific issues provide clues as to journalists' framing decisions. Tankard (2001, p. 97) believes that choosing a frame is the most important decision a journalist makes in building a story, as the selected frame supplies the interpretive context by which issues are judged. Reese (2001, p. 16) uses the term "routinisation" to describe the phenomenon whereby a frame has become entrenched within the organisational practices of journalists and news organisations. Once ingrained in everyday journalistic routines, these frames are drawn upon as a point of reference in which to construct and interpret issues.

It must be noted that journalistic framing of issues and events does not occur in isolation from the various social actors, known as 'frame sponsors' that compete in news texts to ensure their preferred definition of an issue is prominent within the news discourse. Frame sponsors most commonly include politicians, organisations and social movements (Carragee and Roefs, 2004, p. 216). Given that framing is most suitable for reinterpreting messages that convey existing information rather than those messages that provide new information, frame sponsors seek to capitalise on shared frames (Nelson & Willey, 2001, p. 256). Social movements represent the most obvious challenge to prevailing discourses and dominant ideologies that prevail in the media and the public sphere. Particular social movements define themselves through the production of their own frames, however research into social movements and framing has been dominated by studies of how news organisations employ their own frames to categorise social movements (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 225). Particular frames may gain or lose prominence in the news media through time and changing social and political contexts "because journalists define issues over time and because sponsors often restructure their issue frames given changing political conditions" (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216).

News stories are sites of contestation where framing contests take place between the various stakeholders or 'frame sponsors' in a given debate, all competing to have

their view privileged as the commonsense view in which an issue should be framed (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 216). Citing the work of sociologist Joel Bell, Schudson (2003) illustrates this point by asking why some types of crimes become major topics and endure to become cultural categories or frames, while others are compelled on to the public agenda, only to lose prominence rapidly and ultimately fizzle out in the media (Schudson, 2003, p2). In the 1990s, new categories of crime, notably hate crimes and stalking, emerged in American journalism that went on to endure as culturally shared frames, while other crimes like random freeway violence, emerged sporadically, only to fade away just as quickly as they arose. While all of these and other crimes have a strong law and order bent, with the additional conflict value that journalists are drawn to report, hate crimes and stalking importantly had sponsorship (Schudson, 2003, p2). Frame sponsors, in this context, were women's groups who sought to publicise stalking and promote legislation against it, while organisations representing minority groups took up the cause of hate crimes.

Framing and news values

The influence of news values and the dominance of conflict in framing issues is best exemplified through an examination of the framing cycle. The framing cycle itself is a process of struggle and contention, whereby the dominance of a perspective, as communicated by a frame, can set the terms of a debate (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). Miller and Riechert (2001) specifically refer to framing as a process that occurs in a cyclical manner through their interpretation of the "spiral of opportunity". News values ultimately play an instrumental role in the first stage of the framing cycle, the emergence phase, as it is at this stage that journalists decide what is to be reported and emphasised but also what or who is to be excluded (Durham, 2001, p. 125). This initial phase supplies a context upon which issues gain salience, especially in the instance whereby a course of events has provided an impetus to compel an issue onto the wider public agenda (Miller & Riechert, 2001, p. 110). After the initial emergence phase, the conflict and definition phase centres on what is to be emphasised and what is omitted from the terms of a debate.

During the conflict and definition stage, those who stand to win or lose from a policy decision will involve themselves in the policy debate and actively attempt to consolidate their point of view as the commonsense perspective in which to frame the issue (Miller & Riechert, 2001, p. 110). The media attention afforded to given stakeholders will ultimately influence their success in having their perspective viewed

as the appropriate one. It is during the resonance phase that one frame will become dominant and gain widespread public support, which will effectively discredit opposing viewpoints. Critically, the most frequently appearing frame may not be the most important (Reese, 2001, p. 8), as one or two references to a particularly powerful concept can frame great quantities of content and information during the course of a debate (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 52). The final stage in this model is the equilibrium or resolution phase whereby one frame will become totalising and oppositional frames will be completely delegitimised in media and public discourse (Miller & Riechert, 2001, p. 110). At this phase, policy will be set to reflect the dominant frame and those who advocated the losing frame will withdraw from the debate or moderate their position.

Frames and power

In framing salient aspects of an issue, news content is routinely organised and interpreted by distinguishing what is at issue by defining some aspects of an issue as a fact, while excluding other elements (Miller & Riechert, 2001, p. 109). Information may be excluded from a story because it doesn't fit the frame and is thereby not regarded as relevant (Reese, 2001, p. 17). The pervasive nature of frames lies in the way they can be consciously or unintentionally subtlety structured within communicating texts to allow media to facilitate a preferred interpretation of a particular issue or viewpoint, without revealing specific biases (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). Reese (2001, p. 10) considers framing as an "exercise in power" which, when analysed, consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Frames apply a selective lens in which to view issues of social importance in the media.

Ultimately the framing process narrows the information available to audiences so that only the most accessible and available information will be relevant to the receiver (Nelson & Willey, 2001, p. 255). Frames can be a means through which journalists can limit the range of interpretable meanings by an audience by narrowing available information (Durham, 1998, p. 104). Another consequence of the narrowing of information in the framing process is the restriction of sources that can contribute to framing issues. Tankard (2001, p. 96) describes framing as marginalising or even eliminating altogether less prominent voices and often weakening counter arguments to the dominant frame.

Why use framing in looking at the reporting of Geoff Clark?

Framing research can assist in uncovering the ideological position underlying the reporting of an issue (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). The *Australian's* reporting of Geoff Clark is a suitable topic of examination through framing research in this sense, as it is a fundamental division in the ideological approach to Indigenous affairs that this case study seeks to highlight.

Target Newspapers

This study will examine coverage of Geoff Clark in the Rupert Murdoch owned national daily broadsheet the *Australian* and also the *Weekend Australian*. This study will primarily examine select news reports, feature articles, editorials and opinion pieces published in the *Australian* and *Weekend Australian*, at intervals between mid-2002 and April 2004.

The *Australian* has been chosen as the nation's only daily broadsheet, known for its focus on reporting the national implications of issues and its agenda-setting comment. It is said to privilege a neo-Liberal view on social and political issues and is read by an influential demographic of opinion makers and bureaucrats (McKnight, 2003).

In addition, detailed articles from the independently owned *National Indigenous Times* newspaper and individual articles from Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* that have been critical in the coverage of Geoff Clark's affairs will be used as background information. Allegations that Geoff Clark raped four women between 1971 and 1983 were first reported in the Fairfax broadsheets in Andrew Rule's piece 'Geoff Clark: Power and rape,' which was first published on the front page of the *Age* newspaper on 14 June 2001.

In addition to news reports, this study involves the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources, which includes reports, relevant policy documents, academic literature and readily available statistical sources. These documents contextualise the study and provide supporting evidence to the framing analysis. The data obtained from the combined analysis of the newspaper text and the secondary sources provides the evidence upon which the research findings of the study are based.

Approach

It is beyond the scope of an Honours thesis to examine each report from mid-2002 to April 2004 that mentions Geoff Clark or pertains directly to him. However, a methodology of selecting a number of key reports based on the degree of their adherence to news values satisfies Hertog & McLeod's (2001) recommendation that to trace the evolution of a frame it is critical that content from varying time periods is studied (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 151).

A search of News Limited's online Newstext archives was conducted to gather articles from the specified dates, which provided a basis for searching back through hard copies of the newspapers used and viewing the reports in their original context. Based on the work of Meadows, Hippocrates, and van Vuuren (1997) the news schema – including story size and position, headlines, sources quoted, style of reporting, use of background material and an examination of the main focus of each report – were considered in selecting articles for analysis.

In developing a 'three part theory' of news, Masterton (1998) identified three core elements and six major news criteria, or news values, that ultimately determine by their presence in reports, how newsworthy a given topic or event will be. The essence of Masterton's theory of news is that three elements– interest, timeliness and clarity – have to be present for any information to become 'news' (Masterton, 1998, p. 87). Secondly, the level of newsworthiness in what is reported as news is determined by news values or 'criteria' which are universal in that they can be identified across press systems worldwide, which include:

> consequence (importance/impact); proximity (nearness); conflict (disagreement); human interest (stories about people); novelty/unusualness (bizarre/the rare); and prominence (abut prominent people). (Masterton, 1998, p. 91; emphasis in original)

The concept of newsworthiness is comparable in framing theory to 'salience', which refers to the primacy or importance ascribed to a particular aspect of an issue or problem through frames and the framing process in the media. The primary news value in Masterton's (1998) coding, that of consequence, ties in with the fundamental framing principle that journalists use framing to make an initial judgment about the salient aspects of an issue or problem (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107). If it is accepted that journalists will report an issue primarily based on its perceived consequence, then it can be argued that the frames employed in making this initial judgment are critical in setting the scene for subsequently "promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Procedure

To discern how framing was used in the *Australian's* coverage of Geoff Clark, it will be necessary to critically analyse key articles to discern any common themes in the reporting that can be judged to incorporate frames. The coverage of Geoff Clark in the *Australian* can be broken down into a series of phases that relate to the salience of the various issues relating to the chairman's conduct. The ultimate aim is identify common frames in the overall coverage of Geoff Clark and determine how often Mr Clark's personal affairs are linked with ATSIC's perceived failings. According to Iyengar (1991), the tendency to episodically frame a social issue will contribute to audiences ascribing responsibility differently than an issue framed thematically. Critically, audiences relate episodic frames to individual responsibility whereas thematic frames suggest that more systemic causes are responsible for a given problem. Key reports detailing Geoff Clark's affairs will be analysed to discern whether episodic framing is more prevalent than thematic framing in the case of reporting on Geoff Clark.

Limitations

There has been much focus in recent times about Entman's concerns that, in the absence of a "general statement of framing theory", framing research has become a "fractured paradigm" (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Central to Entman's concerns is that the field of inquiry related to frames and framing is too broad and it critically must be a narrowed to a specific set of frames to gain legitimacy (D'Angelo, 2002). Hertog and McLeod (2001) advocate the inclusion of frames identified in previous research into subsequent work to enable patterns to emerge in the field. Framing analysis has not been widely applied to studies of media representation of Indigenous people in Australia so there are limited grounds for direct comparison. The subjective nature of framing also must be taken into consideration, as the interpretation of the appropriate frame for a chosen article will be highly dependent on the researcher.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDINGS

The year 2004 marked 40 years of the *Australian* newspaper. In a series of supplements published in mid-2004, prominent commentators reflected on the social, political and economic changes that have shaped Australian society since the newspaper was established. In the 'Identity' supplement, prominent Indigenous lawyer and regular contributor to the *Australian's* opinion pages, Noel Pearson, wrote a commentary that proposed that, during the *Australian's* lifetime, there have been two "stories" of Indigenous affairs in Australia (Pearson, 2004).

The first of these stories, he termed the "liberal-progressive story of positive advancement", an approach which sought to remedy the discrimination and disadvantage faced by Indigenous people through indigenous-specific programs, like Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (Pearson, 2004). A second aspect of this interpretation was the advancement of Indigenous culture and society, "as being as valuable as Australia's British institutions and perhaps morally superior", most prominently through the incorporation of Indigenous culture in official government policy and the creation of bodies like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (Pearson, 2004). In summary, this approach was unpinned by a view that Indigenous disadvantage would be resolved by abolishing formal discrimination and focusing on the advancement of Indigenous rights.

The liberal-progressive advancement program, in Noel Pearson's view, not only failed, but masked the factors that became dominant in what he considers as the "real life" story of Indigenous communities (Pearson, 2004). Rather than attributing the poor social and economic outcomes in the Indigenous population to a denial of Indigenous rights, the alternative view cites the presence of welfare dependency, substance abuse and the collapse of local subsistence economies, coupled with a lack of Indigenous participation in the market economy and the absence of a discourse on Aboriginal responsibility, as the critical factors that have led to Indigenous disadvantage (Pearson, 2004). Pearson's (2004) interpretation lays out, in summary, the ideological divide that exists between proponents of the "rights-based agenda" in indigenous affairs and those that favour the "responsibilities-based" agenda.

The *Australian* has been highlighted as leading public debate in recent years in reassessing Indigenous affairs policies in a period which has seen a fundamental change in approach to Indigenous affairs, led by the conservative Howard Government. This change is defined by a move away from the so-called 'symbolic' focus on Indigenous people's right to self-determination, to a perspective dominated by a rejection of the rights agenda through the language of "practical reconciliation" and a discourse of 'equality', underpinned by the central idea that Indigenous people should not be treated as separate to the mainstream Australian population:

> The liberal-progressive interpretation of indigenous affairs is not standing up to scrutiny. The *Australian*, warts and all, is the main national forum for this painful reassessment in terms of in-depth analysis and coverage not merely fed by the indigenous leadership debacle. (Pearson, 2004)

While Pearson's analysis highlights the significant role of the *Australian* as a forum for debating Indigenous issues, it is the ideological underpinnings of the *Australian's* coverage of Indigenous people and their affairs that this section will argue requires further examination. Furthermore, the assessment that the "indigenous leadership debacle" in relation to ATSIC has "fed" a "painful reassessment" of the rights agenda is misleading, as it implies that this "in-depth analysis and coverage" is allowing for views supportive of the rights agenda to be credibly added to the reporting, which is not necessarily the case.

Prior to the emergence of a focus on reporting the "indigenous leadership debacle" (Pearson, 2004), "Aboriginal reconciliation" was the prominent overarching issue in Indigenous affairs reporting in the Australian media for a decade throughout the 1990s (see McCallum, 2003; Burrows, 2004). The media's inability to effectively conceptualise the push for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people meant that reconciliation ultimately did not achieve its own media frame during Australia's decade of reconciliation (McCallum, 2003, p. 119). McCallum (2003) attributes this to the fact that the concept of reconciliation was difficult for the media to frame and therefore became reported within the framework of other more prominent Indigenous issues. In the 1990s, a series of key events shaped Indigenous affairs reporting in Australia, which were considered more concrete than reconciliation, as they could be tied to more tangible issues. These included the handing down of the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, the *Mabo v Queensland (no. 2)* native title High Court decision that paved the way for the Native

Title Act 1993 and the 1996 amendments to the Native Title Act. The 1997 release of the *Bringing them home* report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families had a significant role in the framing of reconciliation in the late 1990s:

> From 1997, the 'sorry' debate, regarding an official government apology to Indigenous Australians for child-removal policies, can be seen as the dominant frame through which the media interpreted most indigenous issues, including reconciliation. (McCallum, 2003, p. 120)

McCallum's (2003) findings support notions that some issues become major topics and issues endure to become cultural categories or frames, while others, like reconciliation, are compelled on to the public agenda, only to lose prominence rapidly and ultimately fizzle out in the media (Schudson, 2003, p. 2). McCallum (2003, p. 121) writes that reconciliation in a symbolic sense had all but disappeared from media coverage by 2001 and was replaced by the language of "practical reconciliation" and punctuated by "horrifying reports about crisis levels of distress in Aboriginal communities – domestic violence, homicides and suicides, drunkenness, child neglect and sexual abuse" (Cowlishaw, 2003).

The emergence of reports about the complex social issues that affect the everyday lives of the Indigenous people in Australia appeared to be in stark contrast to the more 'symbolic' calls for reconciliation and the need for a national apology to Indigenous people. As Cowlishaw (2003) observes, media and public debate is now centred on how to "rescue" Indigenous communities from violence and dysfunction, rather than on how to recognise Indigenous land heritage and culture:

> Australia takes pride in deploying images of indigenous people in its self-representations. Thus media revelations about extensive disorder and misery in Australian indigenous communities in this new century dealt the nation a shocking blow...intense public interest in these issues reflected a pervasive and growing disillusionment among those closely involved with policies of self-determination and the apparently disappointing results of recognising native title and indigenous heritage. (Cowlishaw, 2002)

The fundamental shift in Indigenous affairs policy instigated by the Howard Government between 1996 and 1998 rejected the policy of self-determination as it related to Indigenous affairs policy formation and replaced it with their 'practical reconciliation' agenda (Jonas, 2002). Philip Ruddock, who served as Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs from November 2001 to October

2003, articulated the federal government's view on Aboriginal self-determination during an address to the 2002 ATSIC National Policy Conference:

> Some people use words like self-determination loosely. I am all for individuals being able to determine their own destiny. But, in terms of the Australian community, I am not about separateness, I am about inclusiveness. (Ruddock, 2002)

Practical reconciliation became the federal governments' policy approach which would facilitate this "inclusiveness", at least superficially, as a program of government funding, targeting specific areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Indigenous communities, including health, housing, education and employment (Behrendt, 2002, p. 60). In the post-reconciliation phase, where the prevailing approach of recognising Indigenous rights to self-determination became discredited as failing Indigenous people, the language of practical reconciliation was employed in the *Australian* to replace discussions about the more 'symbolic' issues that dominated reporting of Indigenous affairs in the 1990s.

In the year that followed the Rule (2001) article that reported legally untested allegations that Geoff Clark raped four women in the 1970s and 80s, the *Australian* sought to highlight critical issues relating to the poor state of Indigenous health, incorporating issues of family and sexual violence in indigenous communities. The newspaper articulated its stance on these issues in a series of editorials appeared in 2002, which incorporated Geoff Clark into the broader issue of the failures in Indigenous health and also family violence in indigenous communities, focusing on his and ATSIC's failure to act on this issue. Editorial comment in the *Australian* consistently employed an 'attribution of responsibility frame' to suggest that Geoff Clark as an individual is responsible for the serious social problems, such as high levels of domestic violence, that confront Indigenous Australia. The editorials incorporate themes outlined by Brough (1999, p. 91) that contribute to the wider social narrative of Indigenous health as a failure.

> Brough's (1999) study of representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in selected Australian newspapers over a period from 1989–1998 found that dominant themes of laying the blame, failure and fatalism pervade the reporting of indigenous health issues. In a broader sense, Brough writes, the media portrayal of Indigenous health can be read as a "social narrative," which is required to explain why the health status of Indigenous people remains so consistently poor (1999, p. 90).

Brough (1999, p. 95), in discussing the political implications of the dominant reporting of Indigenous health in the mainstream media as a failure, cautions against assuming that there is any link between publicly exposing social injustices and their resolution. Referencing findings from the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Evaluation (1994), which argued that ATSIC provided a convenient scapegoat for the inaction of governments in the area of Indigenous health, Brough (1999) highlights examples of media coverage that paint ATSIC as a "failed black bureaucracy" during 1995 when responsibility for Indigenous health was taken away from ATSIC:

> Regardless of any objective analysis of the decision to shift Commonwealth responsibility [for Indigenous health] from ATSIC, and back to the Commonwealth Department of Health, it is difficult not to see this event as providing popular evidence of an apparent failure of self-determination in health. (Brough, 1999, p. 94)

In considering ATSIC's effectiveness or otherwise, it is pertinent to mention that during ATSIC's existence it has often served as a government and media scapegoat for failures in Indigenous policy outcomes and has consistently been blamed for continuing poor socio-economic and living standards in Indigenous Australia (Behrendt, 2003, p. 67). Indigenous academic Larissa Behrendt describes this phenomenon as "the national pastime of ATSIC bashing" (Behrendt, 2003, p. 67).

The *Australian's* editorials highlight an ideological divide between the Howard Government and Geoff Clark's ATSIC by framing Geoff Clark's focus on a treaty, native title, land rights and reconciliation as distractions from the 'practical' realities of the lives of Indigenous people. Geoff Clark was always forthright about his right-based agenda and the conservative medias opposition to his position: "You know...right wing media in this country...after all, what is it the Geoff Clark and others in ATSIC believe in? What have we advocated for the last 20 years of our life" The rights of Aboriginal people" (Rintoul, 2002b). Evidence that the *Australian's* reporting was biased towards the practical reconciliation agenda of the government is most prominent in the series of editorials in 2002. The lead paragraph of an editorial from September 2002 sets the scene:

> HIGH levels of intra-Aboriginal homicide, an epidemic of domestic violence, sexual assault, alcohol abuse, low living standards and rates of life expectancy that rival sub-Saharan Africa. Aboriginal Australia has paid a perverse price for its hard-won rights. But just as perverse is the notion put forward by black leaders like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission head Geoff Clark

that the injustices of the past and the problems of the present can be resolved by apologies and treaties. ("Black killings", 2002)

The editorial also suggests that Geoff Clark has a "preoccupation with reconciliation and apologies (that) has blinded him to practical outcomes" ("Black killings", 2002). Furthermore, it suggests that "few Aboriginal leaders are prepared to admit their communities' problems have more to do with substance abuse than issues such as land rights" ("Black killings", 2002).

In a separate editorial, Geoff Clark is described as being "(p)reoccupied with righting past wrongs through a treaty" and, in doing so, "ATSIC's leadership has failed the most vulnerable" ("ATSIC fails", 2002). Ultimately, Clark's advocacy of a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and his support for land rights and native title, was incompatible with the view of the Australian Government, and also the *Australian*, that practical, non-symbolic approaches to Indigenous affairs should be privileged. Behrendt (2002) says that policy makers who view their actions as separate to a consideration of Indigenous rights fail to understand the impact their decisions has on the live of the people affected by policy implementation:

> A rejection of the rights agenda is also a rejection of the vision of Indigenous peoples for self-determination. It is patronising to assert that Indigenous people who claim rights and express self-determination in the language of rights have no idea about the issues that affect our community and that we do not understand the solutions to the problems faced by our own families. (Behrendt, 2002a, p. 58)

In essence, practical reconciliation privileges a view "that all that matters" in Indigenous affairs is redressing the stark deficiencies in Indigenous health, education and other areas of significant disadvantage (Grattan, 2004). However, as former ATSIC chair and senior elder of the Wangurri people, Mr Djerrkura, wrote shortly before his tragic passing, symbolism is also important:

> Symbolism matters because it is a reference point for all Australians. The symbols of our nation embody our ideals. They speak to us and to other nations of our identity and beliefs. Symbols can also be a sign of change, a beacon of hope and a declaration of intent. When they reflect our aspirations, they are empowering. (Djerrkura, 2004)

In a more measured approach, a point of congruence between the symbolic and practical approaches to Indigenous affairs could be a solution, but the conflicting

viewpoints that place symbolic issues in the abstract and practical approaches as the commonsense agenda seems to have prevailed in the ATSIC debate.

ATSIC's 'suicide election'

December 2002

In October 2002, about 50,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia voted in the first stage of the ATSIC elections for regional council candidates to fill a total of 388 positions on 35 councils (Rintoul, 2002c). On November 28–29, the councillors elected in the first stage elected zone commissioners to the 18-member ATSIC board, who subsequently elected the chair and deputy chair in December 2002 (Rintoul, 2002c). The complex and drawn-out election process, which stretched to two months before building to the election of a chairperson, was reported in-depth in the *Australian* from mid-2002 to December 2002.

The most important factor in determining the coverage of Geoff Clark is the fact that conflict could be exploited to the fullest possible extent as both a primary news value and a news frame in the reporting. Leading up to the 2002 ATSIC polls, reports in the *Australian* framed the leadership race as a contest between the old order of former Northern Land Council chief executive Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Geoff Clark and 'Sugar' Ray Robinson and the "new guard" led by youthful Northern Territory ATSIC commissioner Kim Hill (Toohey, 2002b). Mr Hill was reported to have "taken aim" at both Geoff Clark and his mentor Galarrwuy Yunupingu in calling for a "sea change" at ATSIC (Rintoul & Roberts, 2002). The *Australian* touted Mr Hill as a "compromise candidate" for the national chairmanship, as someone who could emerge "through the middle of a bitter enmity between incumbent Geoff Clark and his deputy, 'Sugar' Ray Robinson" (Schubert, 2002c). Kim Hill was put forward as the "fresh face" with "no baggage, apart from youth" taking on "two old warriors" in Mr Clark and Mr Robinson (Toohey, 2002b).

In a feature article profiling Kim Hill, journalist Paul Toohey wrote that in electing a chairman, "the ATSIC board will usher in a new guard or they will send a message that bitterness and divisiveness is the way Australia's peak indigenous body likes to do business; and that the most fundamental issues plaguing Aboriginal Australia, of sexual and domestic violence, are of no concern to the board" (Toohey, 2002b). In an editorial leading up to the crucial vote that would determine the ATSIC leadership, the *Australian* mused on the affect leadership tensions were having on the election process:

The focus of this weekend's elections for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission should be on new ways of tackling welfare dependency, substance abuse and giving indigenous Australians a greater say in their own affairs. Instead, ATSIC chairman Geoff Clark and his deputy "Sugar" Ray Robinson are enmeshed in a political struggle that has little to do with confronting the depressing realities of black Australia. ("New leaders", 2002)

The *Australian's* coverage leading up to what materialised to be the final ATSIC elections privileged gave no suggestion that Mr Clark would be re-elected due to a general view that he lacked credibility in light of allegations against him (Schubert, 2002a). In a pre-election profile piece, the *Australian* labelled Geoff Clark as a "lame duck leader" since still-to-be-tested rape allegations against him, saying he faced "an uphill battle to keep the top job" (Schubert, 2002a).

In early October 2002, the *Australian* was already reporting that Geoff Clark appeared to have "all but lost his grip" on the ATSIC leadership "with several key backers facing uphill battles to be re-elected and young indigenous leader Kim Hill saying it is time for Mr Clark to go" (Rintoul, 2002a). On 19 November 2002, the *Australian* reported a "new guard of Aboriginal politicians" had "threatened to snatch the leadership of ATSIC from embattled chairman Geoff Clark" after he lost key backers on the ATSIC board in a crucial round of elections. Contrary to the *Australian's* expectation, Geoff Clark was reinstated as he elected leader of ATSIC in a December 2002 meeting of the ATSIC Board (MacDonald, 2002). Upon re-election to the ATSIC board in December 2002, Mr Clark told the *Australian* that he may shun the mainstream media due to their inability to accept the ATSIC leadership, "I'm seriously thinking about a media ban...where I'd just talk to the black media, and if you guys [the mainstream media] want comment, you'd have to get it from them" (Schubert, Rintoul & Wilson, 2002). Stuart Rintoul's analysis, under the headline "ATSIC's 'suicide selection'", suggested ATSIC "might very well have committed suicide by re-electing a national leadership with crippled credibility" and called ATSIC "a house not just divided but collapsing" (Rintoul, 2002c).

The editorial position of the paper changed abruptly, following the re-election of Geoff Clark, when their news coverage was suggesting a successor, most likely Kim Hill, would be elected to the peak Indigenous agency. The *Australian's* position on ATSIC and Geoff Clark was made clear in an editorial that appeared immediately following his re-appointment to the ATSIC leadership for what materialised to be his and ATSIC's final years ("Time for the end", 2002). ATSIC was framed as being in

crisis mode in the immediate aftermath of the Clark-Robinson re-election, with the coverage stating that "if either man held as elected position in a publicly funded agency of ATSIC's power in the general community, the weight of public opinion would have compelled the board to dismiss them both" ("Time for the end", 2002). Accompanying the editorial is a cartoon which depicts Mr Clark and Mr Robinson on opposite sides of a large canyon, each holding a stick, which supports a banner that reads "ATSICK" (sic) – a play on words using the ATSIC acronym. Between the large chasm that separates the ATSIC leaders are several people, depicted as Indigenous Australians, 'falling through the cracks,' into the abyss. The deep chasm also represents the much-publicised rift that existed between Mr Clark and Mr Robinson, who are described by an unnamed source as detesting each other "like a mongoose and a cobra" (Rintoul, 2002c).

In the front page coverage, as well as a large image of Mr Clark giving a "victory" sign on his way to the press conference that followed his re-election and a smaller inset headshot of his deputy, Mr Robinson, several headshots also appeared with the front page report, which canvassed five prominent peoples' reactions to the election result. Under the heading "Multiple divisions," a headshot of federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock and Indigenous spokespeople, including, ATSIC commissioner Alison Anderson, former ATSIC commissioner Murrandoo Yanner, former Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation chair Pat Dodson and ATSIC's inaugural chair, Lowitja O'Donohue, were accompanied by their respective comments on the election. While Minister Ruddock's comments indicate support for Mr Clark, specifically that "Mr Clark is a vigorous proponent of the interests of his people," the opinions among the Indigenous respondents are more divergent, with Murrandoo Yanner offering the most supportive comment, stating "(Clark and Robinson are) two of the oldest and smartest cookies on the block." Pat Dodson more pointedly expresses a hope that ATSIC "doesn't become a soapbox for (Clark's) personal defence," where Lowitja O'Donohue surmises her feelings about the ATSIC boards choice of leadership in the statement: "More of the bloody same. What gives with these people?." Comments that the leadership team "does nothing to move Aboriginal people forward" from Alison Anderson, who was the only female elected to the 17 member ATSIC board in the 2002 elections, further highlights a seemingly widespread lack of support for the Clark-Robinson leadership team.

The *Australian's* coverage was largely reflective of the views expressed in other major daily newspapers in the days following the 2002 ATSIC board elections. The

editorial in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* describes the ATSIC board as retaining a "regressive status quo" and Mr Clark as "unfit to lead the Aboriginal community" ("Geoff Clark unfit", 2002). Mr Clark's comments about Indigenous people going to extreme lengths to gain native title rights – "Don't put us in the situation where Aboriginal people are strapping bombs to themselves" – were widely condemned in the editorials. In the *Herald Sun*, the paper said Mr Clark's "transparent effort to exploit fear of terrorism in a community reeling from the Bali [terrorist attack] tragedy is contemptible" ("Geoff Clark unfit", 2002). It concluded that "progress for the Aboriginal people will stagnate until Geoff Clark is removed and ATSIC reformed — or scrapped" ("Geoff Clark unfit", 2002). The themes in the editorials are essentially consistent and make reference to the 'missed opportunity' that resulted from the re-election of Mr Clark and Mr Robinson. *The Age* commented that "ATSIC badly needs some new faces and some new approaches" but that it "will not get either from its leadership" ("The choice", 2002). The *Courier Mail's* editorial laments the lack of change, saying "both the ATSIC chairman and the deputy, with whom he is constantly at war, have been tainted by accusations which would have made mainstream politicians unelectable" ("ATSIC fails to heed calls", 2002).

Critically, the editorial that appeared following the re-election of Geoff Clark could be said to have framed media coverage of both Clark and ATSIC from that point to the time ATSIC was abolished, given that one or two references to a particularly powerful concept can frame great quantities of content and information during the course of a debate (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 52).The editorial importantly signalled a change in the position of the newspaper from a debate about ATSIC's future with a potentially new leadership to whether the organisation should exist at all, as indicated by the title of the editorial 'Time for the end of ATSIC.' From December 2002 onwards, the *Australian* sought to report ATSIC as failing Indigenous people and Geoff Clark as being responsible for these failures, due to his disengagement from his constituency.

ATSIC: It's War

April 2003

In April 2003, the War in Iraq was dominating national media coverage, leading
to a constriction of the news agenda, due to the broad saturation coverage of the
conflict. However, Geoff Clark and ATSIC were still reported prominently at this time,
as the issue complied with the broader conflict frame prominent in coverage of the war
and incorporated the required news values, again conflict and more broadly prominence
and proximity, to remain salient. Conflict is a key news value, which rates third in
Masterton's (1998) ranking of news values, particularly in reporting in the Australian
context: "Australia's is a confronting society, compared with those around us, and our
media confirm this everyday. Our politics is reported as it is debated, as conflict"
(Masterton, 1998, p. 96). Critically, conflict forms the core basis of most frames and in
the absence of conflict as a major driving force, a frame will often lose its effectiveness
(Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 148).

In the context of the Iraq War, the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly
reported the Howard Government was "flexing its muscles on the home front" in a
"political war" against ATSIC over "Aboriginal self-management" (Kelly, 2003). Under
the headline "ATSIC: It's WAR," the report summarises the political war between the
Howard Government and the ATSIC leadership:

> A showdown between the elected Aboriginal body and the Howard Government
> has put the quality of indigenous governance in Australia on the line. As
> Australians were fixated on Iraq this week, there was a political war at home – a
> bitter, conspiratorial, changing battle over Aboriginal self management. (Kelly,
> 2003)

The timing of the report coincided with moves by the Howard Government to
introduce a 'separation of powers' arrangement into ATSIC's governance structure,
thereby curtailing the ATSIC board's power to make funding decisions, which was
predicted to "create another furore in relations between the Howard Government and
Aboriginal Australia" (Kelly, 2003). The article frames the conflict as a stand off
between Mr Clark and Minister Ruddock, reflected in the conflict-laden terminology
employed in the reporting, which talks of a government that had "exhausted its
tolerance for ATSIC's financial abuses" and a minister who has "sent a public signal
about his private threat" to Mr Clark by setting the scene for using the 2003 federal
budget to strip ATSIC of control of its $1.2 billion budget (Kelly, 2003). The "clash

over Aboriginal governance" is said to follow "the collapse of relations between Ruddock and Clark," as evidenced in reported "palpable" tension between the two figures (Kelly, 2003). The full page report is largely set against a picture of Mr Clark in the foreground, being shadowed by Minister Ruddock – albeit disengaged from one another – accompanied by the caption: "Loggerheads: Ruddock and Clark are locked in a battle over Aboriginal self-management" (Kelly, 2003).

The terminology of "Aboriginal self-management" replaced "self-determination" in political discourse in Australia in the Howard Government era to ensure Indigenous affairs policy was not aligned with the broader concept of self-determination as Indigenous people pursuing "a separate nation within a nation" (Ruddock, 2002). Minister Ruddock articulated his view on Aboriginal self-determination during an address to the 2002 ATSIC National Policy Conference:

> Some people use words like self-determination loosely. I am all for individuals being able to determine their own destiny. But, in terms of the Australian community, I am not about separateness, I am about inclusiveness. (Ruddock, 2002)

Indigenous academic Larissa Behrendt (2002b) interprets statements of inclusiveness as statements of "assimilation and integration" (Behrendt, 2002b, p. 32). The terminology in the report highlights the "battle over Aboriginal self-management" as the salient aspect of the story, yet the baseline issue is the financial accountability of individual members of the ATSIC Board (Kelly, 2003). The reporting is consistent with Reece's (2001) findings that a story framed episodically, complete with real social actors in a news event, is more accessible to an audience than "the more accurate, perhaps, but duller thematic, 'baseline' story" (Reese, 2001, p12).

The media, in Tiffen's (1999) view, does not have the capacity or the imperative to explore in-depth issues far beyond the surface conflict, with the media being more likely to focus on uncovering individual culpability than on institutional inadequacy, as news values place a higher premium on securing scalps than exploring system failure (Tiffen, 1999, p. 250). Given the preceding events, it was indeed easier for the media to seek to secure Mr Clark's scalp than to delve into the wider and more complex question of Indigenous governance. In reiterating that the mantra of self-determination, or self-management, was linked to conflict and failure in Indigenous Australia and attributing responsibility to ATSIC for this, the concept would lose wider community support if it

failed. The debate was disingenuous, as the only alternative to self-management put forward by the government was mainstreaming indigenous affairs, which is simply delivering services through existing agencies.

Travel rorts: Is this ATSIC chief's last slip

May 2003

The *Australian's* attention intensified on Geoff Clark in May 2003, with revelations that he had allegedly misused taxpayers' money to fund an official overseas trip for himself and his wife. On 31 May 2003, the Weekend *Australian* reported that it had obtained documents under Freedom Of Information legislation that indicated that Mr Clark had misled the federal government by taking a $31,000 taxpayer-funded trip to Ireland (Schubert & McKinnon, 2003). Mr Clark reportedly told Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock that he would attend a week-long human rights conference, but was alleged to have spent most of his time travelling around with friends (Schubert & McKinnon, 2003). The *Australian* questioned whether the alleged travel rorts were the ATSIC leader's "last slip" on the way to his possible sacking (Schubert & McKinnon, 2003).

The prominent front page report spills over to a page two graphic entitled "Geoff Clark's excellent adventure," depicting a map showing a full itinerary, with associated costs, of Mr Clark's overseas travel. An editorial – "Clark's choice: explain or resign"– outlines two choices for Mr Clark – explain his actions or resign as ATSIC chair. This editorial ties Geoff Clark to his public position "on what might have been business conducted on behalf of indigenous Australians but looks remarkably like a holiday" and declares "he is unfit for office and unworthy to represent Aboriginal Australia" ("Clark's choice", 2003). The editorial appeared on the letters page of the *Weekend Australian* (2003, p. 16), accompanied by a Bill Leak cartoon with Geoff Clark and Prime Minister John Howard seated at a table strewn with holiday pictures of Rome and Dublin, fine wine and champagne. The Prime Minister and Geoff Clark both hold their Australian Tax Payer "Gold Card" up to a waiter, but Howard in a speech bubble says "No, no, mate...I insist...". The Prime Minister was under intense media scrutiny at the time for spending $42,680 for a Rome hotel room and a bill for staff room costs that totalled $22,722 (King, 2003). Comparatively, Mr Clark's costs pale in comparison to the Prime Minister's, yet the level of scrutiny applied to Geoff Clark is significant under the circumstances.

Notably, some of Mr Clark's closest supporters referred to him as the "Indigenous equivalent of the Prime Minister" (Rintoul, 2004b) and Mr Clark was undeniably one of the most highly paid Indigenous bureaucrats in the country. In an

edition of the *Weekend Australian* in December of 1988 at the time ATSIC was first proposed, political analyst Paul Kelly asked the question, "Is the Government really responding to the needs of Aboriginal Australia [through ATSIC] or the ambitions of an Aboriginal elite?" (Kelly, 2004). Overall, Geoff Clark was framed as enjoying the trappings of the Aboriginal elite, linking to the earlier Aboriginal privilege discourse, however, this time with the privilege only shared among a few. There are numerous references to "black Australia" throughout the reporting, a term which remains undefined, but can be interpreted to mean the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, presumably in isolation from the "elite" ATSIC leadership.

Cowlishaw (2002) theorises that in general Indigenous leaders are placed in "two mutually exclusive positions" as the "objects of worry" and as "the consultants to their own problems". In addition, they are asked to "counsel the nation on issues such as the 'worrying level of violence in indigenous communities'" (Cowlishaw, 2002). Unfortunately, these same "articulate, educated and vocal Indigenous people can be dismissed as having very little to do with their own communities" (Behrendt, 2002a, p. 27). In Geoff Clark's case, the *Australian's* view that he was out of touch with his constituency was specifically highlighted in the reports about his travel activities, but the same was not said of John Howard, whose broader constituency also includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people suffering levels of extreme disadvantage in some cases.

ATSIC a 'corrupt shambles'

June 2003

On 12 November 2002, Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock appointed a three member panel to review ATSIC's role and functions, which was predicted to recommend key sweeping changes to the body (Schubert, 2002). The review panel consisted of Indigenous academic Jackie Huggins, former Labor senator Bob Collins and former New South Wales Liberal John Hannaford, who invited public submissions to inform the review and undertook targeted consultations with key stakeholders in Indigenous affairs policy-making and service delivery agencies. In June 2003, the ATSIC review panel released a public discussion paper to canvas issues and discuss them in the second stage of consultation. Highlighted in the *Australian's* feature reports about the release of the discussion paper was the lack of credibility of the ATSIC leadership, seen as they key factor in attracting negative media attention and tarnishing the credibility of the organisation.

The ATSIC review panel reportedly wrote that "poor standards of behaviour (on the national board) were seen as contributing to increased negative media attention towards ATSIC and damaging the efforts of the organisation" (Schubert, 2003a). In the lead paragraph, the report also implies that the fact ATSIC was not a "white organisation" prevents it from being regarded as a "corruption-riddled shambles" (Schubert, 2003a), but leaves out the context in which these comments were made. It is important to note that this statement is not explained, leaving open the interpretation that this dichotomy should be viewed primarily through the "Aboriginal privilege frame" and, in this case, an abuse of that privilege and a failure of self-determination. A media statement released by the ATSIC board took issue with the *Australian's* report, calling it "deliberately misleading" and suggesting the headline takes the "corrupt shambles" statement out of context, making it look as though it is a direct comment that reflects the review panel's view of ATSIC when this was not the case. The statement further calls the *Australian's* report "misleading journalism at its worst" and says the ATSIC board "will not allow such media misreporting (and even outright deceit) to cruel the chances of a productive public discussion on the ideas and options in the discussion paper" (ATSIC, 2003). The sentiment in the statement presents a counter view to the *Australian's* report, which is almost solely centred around the ATSIC's failings.

The *Australian's* editorial – "To empower Aborigines, end ATSIC" – was an unequivocal statement that the *Australian* did not support the ATSIC model, but it was less clear on what should replace the peak Indigenous body. The editorial speaks of an ATSIC leadership that "staggers from discredit to disgrace" but says "the failure of ATSIC's leadership does not make a case for passing responsibility for indigenous health, education and welfare to other government agencies ("To empower Aborigines", 2003). The editorial uses the example of the poor state of Indigenous health to acknowledge that "returning Aboriginal health to the commonwealth in the middle 1990s has not delivered the major improvements that would justify a move in other areas" ("To empower Aborigines", 2003). The idea of "passing responsibility" for "health, education and welfare" to mainstream government departments highlights an error of fact often made in reports about ATSIC – that it was solely "responsible" for both the funding and outcomes in these policy areas.

In terms of Indigenous health, which was taken out of ATSIC's control in 1994, Behrendt (2003) cites a submission by the Commonwealth Department of Health of Ageing to the most recent ATSIC Review that highlights the way in which mainstream departments escaped accountability while ATSIC existed. In its submission, the Commonwealth Department of Health of Ageing suggested that any measurable improvements to indigenous health, from the department's point of view, will be incremental and will occur over a number of years:

> In other words, the Department of Health of Ageing, which has had the Indigenous health portfolio since 1995, needs longer to prove that its programs and polices are effective. ATSIC, which has operated for only twelve years on Indigenous issues of comparable difficulty, is not given such leeway to prove itself. (Behrendt, 2003, p. 28)

The *Australian* has shown in its reporting that it holds ATSIC as principally responsible for the comparatively poor living conditions in Indigenous communities and the resulting health and social issues, without taking into account the significant role that other mainstream government departments:

> The escalating crisis in Indigenous health and the level of violence — especially sexual violence — in indigenous communities demonstrates that ATSIC is incapable of creating and implementing policies that protect the most fundamental human rights of Aboriginal Australians ("To empower Aborigines", 2003).

The *Australian* routinely concludes that ATSIC's inability to make any progress on advancing the life chances of Indigenous people was directly related to the agency's focus on 'symbolic' issues:

> The [ATSIC review] report, quietly and carefully, also indicates that the established wisdom — that Aborigines are desperate for land rights and a treaty between Australia's original inhabitants and the national Government — is plain wrong... Communities cursed with appalling health and housing and where life expectancies are decades beneath other Australians face problems that symbolic solutions will never fix. ("To empower Aborigines", 2003)

What is implicit in the editorial is that the *Australian* views Indigenous affairs policies that are tied to a focus on rights, rather than taking responsibility, as failures. This general theme is found throughout the reporting phases and demonstrates that the 'attribution of responsibility frame' is applied in relation to ATSIC, resulting in a view that the agency had failed Indigenous people through inaction and incompetence. While ATSIC should not be free from scrutiny and accountability in relation to certain aspects of Indigenous affairs policy, it should not have shouldered all of the blame in an area where short-term solutions, by the government's own admission, will never be effective.

Ruddock suspends Clark

August 2003

On 13 August 2003, the front page of the *Australian* reported that Indigenous affairs Minister Philip Ruddock had suspended Geoff Clark on the grounds of misbehaviour, five months after Mr Clark was convicted of obstructing police and behaving in a riotous manner in an incident outside of a public bar in the Victorian town on Warrnambool in 2001 (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003b). The front page report was dominated by government sources, most prominently Minister Ruddock, Prime Minister John Howard, Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway and the Labor opposition spokesperson on Indigenous affairs, Bob McMullan. Tuchman (1978), in observing reporters and editors, concluded that they were seen to never challenge the right of an appointed official to make news, as the assumption is that the holder of a "legitimated status" speaks for the government (Tuchman, 1978, p. 92). McLeod and Detenber (1999, p. 6) deduce that journalists rely heavy on official sources in order to add credibility to a story, to increase the efficiency of news production and to avoid overtly compromising their objectivity. The use of official sources, by implication, will mean that those quoted will both define the terms of a debate and structure the discussion.

Government officials are the most prominent sources of news available to reporters and a reliance on authoritative government sources can be attributed to their accessibility, their media suitability, predictability, their profile and perceived credibility (Bennett, 2000, p. 211). Citing unnamed "government sources," the report states "it was a Freedom Of Information request by the *Australian* seeking details of the trip that accelerated greater scrutiny of Mr Clark's conduct" (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003b). Geoff Clark's "fall from grace" is detailed in a timeline embedded in a report – "Clark goes quietly as high noon comes" – that describes Mr Clark's final moments as ATSIC chair, before being served with a suspension notice from Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock.

Cited in the reports is a reference to both "outrage and relief" in Indigenous Australia at the decision to suspend Mr Clark: "For some indigenous leaders, Geoff Clark's suspension as ATSIC chairman couldn't come soon enough. Others were outraged at what they saw as a denial of natural justice and an affront to self-determination" (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003c). Jopson (2002) suggests that part of the reason any discontent in the Indigenous community relating to Mr Clark's chairmanship

was mostly unvoiced in the public arena was due to a distrust of the media and its ability to exploit indigenous division. Under the headline, "Suspension divides indigenous leaders", which in itself foregrounds conflict and division in the indigenous leadership, prominent indigenous people offered their views on the suspension (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003c). Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway was critical of the time taken by the government to act, saying: "The minister could have acted five months ago and avoided these months of drama for the ATSIC chairman, the ATSIC board and indigenous people" (Schubert & Rintoul, 2003b).

The oft-quoted sources employed in reports to convey this relief and outrage are drawn from a narrow pool of prominent Indigenous people. On balance, the reactions are pragmatic and sensible individual views that express views both for and against Mr Clark. In common though is the shared view that the federal government had allowed ATSIC's reputation to be tarnished by not acting sooner in moving to dismiss Mr Clark. The key points emerging from the Indigenous sources cited, however, diluted as they may appear in the overall reporting context, call for reform, not abolition of ATSIC, and for the government to act in removing Mr Clark from the chairmanship. The government message is most prominently an unwillingness to intervene in Indigenous self-determination, yet the underlying philosophy that underpins the government's change of direction in Indigenous affairs is their intention to mainstream the delivery of programs.

Latham puts ATSIC out of its misery

March 2004

Ross (2003) suggests that the media will criticise government policies most virulently when policy makers lack consensus. It was in the context of the 2004 federal election campaign that the political consensus lacking in the ATSIC debate abruptly changed from a discussion about reforming the peak Indigenous body, as recommended by the final report of the ATSIC review panel in November 2003, to majority support for abolishing ATSIC from both major political parties. On 30 March 2004, then Australian Labor Party leader Mark Latham announced that, if elected, Labor would abolish ATSIC and ATSIS and consult with Indigenous people about an adequate structure to replace the peak body (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004). Labor's policy was a 'framework of principles' rather than a detailed plan, being similar to what ATSIC itself, the ATSIC Review and the probable federal government plan were suggesting (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004).

Mark Latham's plan for ATSIC was the first major policy announcement by the opposition leader after an election promise to bring home Australian soldiers from the Iraq war by Christmas 2004 ultimately failed to win widespread public support ("Latham puts ATSIC out", 2004). Media commentators said that Mark Latham made the announcement to both divert attention from his unpopular 'troops home from Iraq' statement and also to "gazump" the Howard Government's own plans to reform ATSIC (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004). Mr Latham is reported to have said that ATSIC had "been very much damaged by leadership turmoil" and that he'd publicly declared a "lack of confidence in Geoff Clark," namely during parliamentary Question Time on 26 March, when Mr Latham asked why it had taken the Government so long to sack Mr Clark to "enable Indigenous Australians to have the leadership they need for a better future?" ("Labour urges PM," 2004). An image of Mr Clark appears embedded within the text in a front page report in the *Australian* the day after the announcement – 'Labor to scrap ATSIC' – but for the most part, the report draws on conflict frames to draw upon concerns within the Labor partyroom about a lack of consultation between the leader and the party over the "radical" ATSIC plan (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004). Geoff Clark figures at the end of the report only to say Mr Latham was joining the federal governments' attack on Indigenous Australians and winding back self-determination (Morris, Lewis & Hickman, 2004).

In an editorial on 1 April 2004, the *Australian* praised Mark Latham's moves to abolish ATSIC, reporting the announcement as the opposition leader putting ATSIC "out of its misery" ("Latham puts ATSIC out," 2004). In the editorial, the *Australian* says that "what really condemns ATSIC is the fact that, as a Productivity Commission report last November put it, the conditions of Aboriginal life have "deteriorated or regressed" during the 15 years ATSIC has been operating" ("Latham puts ATSIC out", 2004). The *Australian* was largely supportive of Mr Latham's move, as it represented a major departure from the rights-based politics so prominent in the days of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. An opinion piece by editor-at-large Paul Kelly, published after the Labor announcement, observed that the political consensus that resulted from Mark Latham's plan to abolish ATSIC would have been unimaginable in previous years (Kelly, 2004). The 1 April editorial states Mr Latham has been honest enough to recognise ATSIC's failure in improving the living standards and conditions of Indigenous people, "ignoring those on the Labor Left, who have kept faith in the centralised, and segregationist, vision that ATSIC embodies long after it was abandoned by a new generation of Aboriginal leaders" ("Latham puts ATSIC out," 2004). Mr Latham's approach to Indigenous leader Noel Pearson was another reason for the *Australian* to support the opposition's policy, with Pearson's approach to Indigenous affairs policy more consistent with the *Australian's* emphasis on Indigenous people take responsibility for their own future though a focus on practical issues. Rintoul (2004a) points out Pearson outlined his new direction in a self-published monograph *Our right to take responsibility* and that Latham's announcement's first lines were "Australia needs to find new ways of giving indigenous Australians the opportunity to take responsibility for their future" (cited in Rintoul, 2004a).

Following the Labor Party's announcement that it would abolish ATSIC, a lengthy feature article by journalist Stuart Rintoul introduced the 'dead and buried' theme in relation to ATSIC, most prominently employed in the article title – "Few lament death knell" – and reinforced by Rintoul's opening paragraph: "[ATSIC]– the Hawke government's answer to Aboriginal poverty and alienation – is dead. The body might twitch for a while, but the life support system has been switched off" (Rintoul, 2004a). The second paragraph cites Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway's comment that ATSIC is "dead in the water and exists in name only," as well as former Labor Senator Bob Collins statement that "[ATSIC] is as dead as a doornail. It's up there swinging in the breeze just waiting for someone to come along and cut it down"

(Rintoul, 2004a). Most importantly, themes of attribution of blame and responsibility emerge when Rintoul asks "who killed ATSIC?". He again cites Bob Collins to foreground Geoff Clark's culpability in the downfall of the organisation as saying: "The ship has gone down with the captain" (Rintoul, 2004a).

The ATSIC leadership and other prominent Indigenous people were split in their response to the Labor Party's plan, being described in Rintoul's report as being "caught in a conundrum...at once highly critical (of ATSIC) but unwilling to abandon it" (Rintoul, 2004a). While some Indigenous leaders welcomed the Labor plan as a fresh start and a chance for a bipartisan approach to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, others criticised the lack of consultation, with fears that Indigenous affairs being used as a political football, especially as the abolition of ATSIC was announced before another model was worked out (Rintoul, 2004a). Rintoul (2004a) cites Bob Collins' suggestion that a small group in the Indigenous leadership was determined that if Mr Clark fell, ATSIC would fall too, "and that's what's happened...almost wall to wall disaffection with ATSIC and its national leadership," Mr Collins said. Geoff Clark figures prominently in the report, saying he does not accept the blame for ATSIC's demise, because he was the victim of "a deliberate campaign of vilification and deception" (Rintoul, 2004a). When asked about greater regional responsibility for ATSIC under Mark Latham's plan, Mr Clark said: "There's as much nastiness and division and jealousy within regions as there is within the national debate" (Rintoul, 2004a).

A picture of Mr Clark, alongside two smaller images of Mr Latham and Mr Howard, captioned as showing three figures, "divided on the future," is a prominent aspect of the report. Mr Clark is cast as somewhat of a pariah, with Rintoul stating that his "career has been silently condemned by parliament as the Government's intention to dismiss him has sat in the two houses without demur" (Rintoul, 2004a). This silent condemnation and lack of protest against Mr Clark would signify government inaction. Beyond that, Rintoul wondered whether Mark Latham's announcement had inadvertently given John Howard the ammunition to do away with any separate Indigenous representative body: "[H]as Mark Latham handed John Howard all the reason he needs to finally destroy (in an election year) the philosophy of separateness – which he opposed at ATSIC's inception when he argued that establishing a "black parliament" was "an act of national lunacy" that "struck at the heart of the unity of the Australian people"?" (Rintoul, 2004a).

Howard buries ATSIC

April 2004

An announcement on 15 April 2005 by Prime Minister John Howard that ATSIC would be abolished with immediate effect came within only weeks of the Labor Party's announcement that it would do the same if elected. As observed by the late Mr Djerrkura, who chaired ATSIC in the mid-1990s, the organisation had been abolished when it was at its weakest point (Djerrkura, 2004). In the *Australian's* reporting, themes of failure and laying the blame come through strongly, most prominently in the front page report on the Prime Ministers' announcement, which highlights John Howard's quote that elected representation for Indigenous people was "a failed experiment" above the more prominent headline "Howard buries ATSIC" (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004).

A large picture of Geoff Clark under the headline, accompanied by a significantly smaller, cropped image of acting ATSIC chair Lionel Quartermaine and a prominent quote underscores the significance of Mr Clark to the wider agenda. Highlighted is Mr Quartermaine's comment: "To justify all indigenous issues on one man (Clark) and to blame one man for the downfall and the responsibility of education and employment, then I'm disillusioned with our leaders" (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004). Visually, the strategic use of Mr Clark's image, rather than that of the Prime Minister, who made the announcement, points to Mr Clark as the most salient aspect of the story, as if he is the one to be buried. Framing the story in this way employs themes of failure and blame through the 'attribution of responsibility frame', carrying the implication that Mr Clark is responsible for the downfall of the organisation.

The theme "Death of ATSIC" is used as a strapline in the extensive analysis on page four of the 16 April 2004 edition, with the most prominent of five discrete reports covering the abolition canvassing prominent indigenous people's reactions to the announcement under the headline: "Few mourn last rites of failed body," again evoking the "dead and buried" theme (Schubert, Rintoul, & Maiden, 2004). The report notably draws on frames of social protest, to warn– in threatening terms– of a "new era of black radicalism", specifically highlighting comments by ATSIC's first chair Lowitja O'Donoghue that the decision to deprive Indigenous people of democratic representation "may push us [the Indigenous community] to where were fighting for our rights on the streets" (Schubert, Rintoul, & Maiden, 2004). Geoff Clark makes a similar

comment in the front page report: "We will keep fighting. We will fight by whichever means necessary to get it (ATSIC) back" (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004).

The unintended consequence of the creation of ATSIC, according to historian Henry Reynolds, was that it occupied the space of dissent that was previously the domain of Indigenous causes "where there might have been a continuing, independent political movement [for Indigenous people]" (cited in Jopson, 2005). Furthermore, social groups that, from the 1970s, marched in the streets for equal rights for Indigenous people and agitated for a national treaty and land rights "fell too much under the Federal Government's wing during the reconciliation decade of the 1990s" according to Henry Reynolds (cited in Jopson, 2005). Social movements represent the most obvious challenge to prevailing discourses and dominant ideologies that prevail in the media and the public sphere. Particular social movements define themselves through the production of their own frames and Geoff Clark importantly draws on the pre-ATSIC environment to shape his counter-frames to the government's message by casting himself as a radical element in Indigenous politics. In the context of the report, there is a reference made to comments by the Prime Minister that ATSIC had become "preoccupied with "symbolic" issues, at the expense of providing basic services to Indigenous communities" (Lewis, Maiden & Schubert, 2004).

In an analysing the government's announcement in a comment piece – "Clark the beginning of the end"– Stuart Rintoul repeats John Howard's comments in 1989 about ATSIC's establishment being "an act of national lunacy" that "struck at the heart of the unity of the Australian people" (Rintoul, 2004b). In commenting that "elected representation for indigenous people has been a failure", Rintoul said John Howard was returning to the core principle he'd espoused at ATSIC's creation that Indigenous people "should not be treated differently" (Rintoul, 2004b). This rhetoric carried over into wider opposition to ATSIC by framing the agency as an institutionally sanctioned form of separatism and Indigenous self-government that ascribed special and exclusive rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Arguably the ideological approach to Indigenous affairs by the Howard Government, underpinned by a discourse of equality and a push for integration and assimilation, has risen to become the dominant paradigm in which Indigenous affairs is reported in *The Australian*.

In declaring that the move to abolish ATSIC and administer Indigenous programs through mainstream departments takes Indigenous affairs "back to before

1989", Stuart Rintoul acknowledges that mainstreaming in the pre-ATSIC environment was also a failure and the areas of most abject Indigenous disadvantage, health and education, were not ATSIC's responsibility (Rintoul, 2004b). This report is one of many examples that highlights the lack of consensus in the reporting of Geoff Clark and ATSIC in the *Australian*, where on the one hand it was seeking Geoff Clark's scalp and ATSIC's abolition for their respective failings, while on the other hand being of the view that mainstream federal government approaches offered no better alternative.

In considering framing as a deliberate strategic action, it is important to consider the possible implications of the failure of the government-sponsored frames. In discrediting self-determination and attributing the failures in Indigenous affairs to an individual, the government won the debate in making it appear as though mainstreaming government services to Indigenous people was the logical and sound way to progress. If the government was not able 'to frame to win', accusations of paternalism and racism would emerge. The debate was essentially levelled via the Aboriginal privilege frame and the abuse of that privilege through Geoff Clark.

The ATSIC leadership may have been reported to have reached a crisis point from which it could not recover. Though, if removing the leadership was the agenda, the *Australian* quickly changed its tune once the opportunity to abolish the body as a whole arose. The debate in the *Australian* had come full-circle by advocating the reversion of Indigenous services to mainstream departments. The debate on Indigenous self-determination was more or less closed from that point onwards, though the immediate period following ATSIC's demise, it could be said that the articles in the *Australian* were characterised by 'post-mortem' reporting, by discussing where the ATSIC model went so wrong and finally posing the question as to what the replacement for ATSIC could be. This question, interestingly, was never canvassed to any extent while the calls for ATSIC's demise were made.

CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSION

When established in 1990, ATSIC was viewed as a significant step towards Aboriginal self-determination and self-management. With the official federal government policy shifting away from self-determination (Ruddock, 2003), ATSIC's future was always in doubt and arguably Clark was a government and media conduit used to justify the agency's demise.

Looking at the frames used in the *Australian* newspaper in coverage of Indigenous leader Geoff Clark, from his re-election as chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) at the end of 2002 until the agency's demise in March 2004, one finds two ways of viewing of Indigenous issues on either side of an ideological divide. One can be called 'rights-based agenda' in indigenous affairs and the other the 'responsibilities-based agenda'.

This thesis shows the *Australian* as a leading proponent of the responsibilities-based agenda, which has sought to highlight the shortcomings of the rights-based agenda by championing the Howard Governments practical approaches to indigenous affairs and rejecting symbolic approaches as failures, particularly through ATSIC's last chairman Geoff Clark.

The debate over whether Geoff Clark should be sacked for various indiscretions had been plagued by inaction from the federal government and the opposition parties, and subsequently the issue continued to gain salience as each rape allegation was made, as each court case was heard and each time the media ascribed the blame for any Indigenous affairs issues to the dysfunctional ATSIC leadership. The self-perpetuating cycle resulted in increased and scrupulous coverage of the policy issue as a whole, which was then narrowly framed to incorporate news values and provided a context for conflict frames that dominated the debate. During the final years of the organisation's existence, Clark was the central figurehead of the agency and individually was framed to personify everything that was wrong with Indigenous Australia in the eyes of the mainstream media and society. Considerations of an alternative structure, a devolution

of ATSIC to the regions, or a long-term plan to see the agency evolve from a government bureaucracy to a self-determining advocacy body were lost in the abolition agenda.

While ATSIC existed, the politics of division were exploited to their fullest possible extent at the expense of holding anyone accountable for Indigenous affairs in Australia. Geoff Clark essentially represented the last bastion of the rights agenda in the Indigenous affairs landscape. By virtue of his prominence and unrelenting opposition to the Howard Governments policies, he provided an alternative view, or counter frame in the media to the government's agenda of mainstreaming Indigenous affairs. There are other prominent indigenous Australians that advocate a continued focus on issues like reconciliation, but don't have the prominence in the media that Clark attracted due to his controversial actions and radical approach to issues. ATSIC was viewed as being a distraction from the critical issues, yet in its absence, these issues are prevalent as they ever were.

If it is accepted that the self-determination paradigm has gone with ATSIC, framing a lack of progress on social and economic indicators for Indigenous people as a failure of self-determination can no longer be sustainable. For comparative purposes, an evaluation of the scrutiny afforded to mainstream government agencies now that ATSIC does not exist could be a future direction for studies.

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