

A licence to print good news? No thanks



PETER COSTELLO

There was an inquiry in 1981 into ownership and control of newspapers in Victoria by a retired Supreme Court judge. I worked on it as a lawyer representing Fairfax.

There was a commonwealth parliamentary inquiry in 1991 into print media. It turned into a tour de force for Kerry Packer. I served on the committee as an MP.

Now the Greens leader, Bob Brown, has come up with a very novel idea – another inquiry into the media. He sees an opportunity arising from the phone hacking scandal in Britain. But no one has suggested anything like that conduct occurred in Australia. And if it has, we don't need a media inquiry for that. We need a police investigation.

Brown is complaining of what he calls "the hate media". By this he does not mean media that advocates gay bashing or boycotts against Jewish business. By this he means media that is critical of the carbon tax that Julia Gillard promised not to introduce and which is opposed by 60 per cent of Australians.

Brown has suggested a new licensing regime so newspapers can only be published by "a fit and proper" person. By definition a person who spreads hate is not "fit and proper". So there you have a neat little formula: if a newspaper's coverage engenders "hatred" for certain policies then you take away the licence.

Julia Gillard and Stephen Conroy seem to be keen on an inquiry. They are not silly enough to try to close down newspapers – no matter how critical they get. But they are smart enough to know that if an inquiry

opens up ownership and regulation issues, they can promise benefits or withdraw privileges that may have a real financial effect on publishers. And with an inquiry under way, owners and

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their editors might be a little more careful about their criticism.

It is a good strategy. By starting a debate on media bias, they have cleverly got the discussion off the carbon tax. And an inquiry could leave the media in a state of flux and uncertainty right through to the next election.

In February 2010 Senator Conroy surprised financial markets by announcing a cut in television licence fees – a rebate of 33 per cent in 2010 and 50 per cent in 2011 for the commercial networks. This is a government that cannot balance its budget. It has introduced a new flood tax. It complains that middle income earners get tax breaks. Yet why of all the taxpayers in Australia do you think three wealthy television networks were singled out for \$200 million of tax breaks six months before an election?

Senator Conroy became a powerful ALP factional boss by rewarding friends and punishing enemies. He thinks he can run media policy the same way.

Those who want a licensing regime for newspapers point to the fact that television and radio stations need licences. Have you noticed that broadcasters in this country have higher standards than newspapers as a result? If it hasn't led to better broadcast standards, why would it affect print media?

And there is a fundamental difference. Television and radio stations are licensed to use a public asset – the spectrum – for which they pay a fee. Newspapers do not use public resources. Introducing a new licence and fee regime for print would provide a mechanism for canny politicians to ingratiate themselves by offering rebates from time to time.

All my experience tells me that when a government begins to play around with new forms of media regulation what they really have in mind is content – in particular how to promote favourable comment and discourage critical comment.

In my time in politics some of the most disgraceful reporting came from the ABC. But senators Brown and Conroy have no proposals for new regulation there.

Don't get me wrong. I am no fan of the Australian media. I have put up with too many distortions and misrepresentations to count. But allowing media to be free – including the freedom to be wrong – is necessary if we want to live in a democracy. And the proposals being bandied around now are not part of a considered plan to encourage a flourishing critical media. In fact, just the reverse.

Peter Costello is a former Liberal treasurer.