The Referendum Debate: A Note on Press Coverage

NANCY STONE

The ‘quality’ press played a central part in the 1999 republic referendum debate. The Victorian ‘No Republic’ committee asked me to examine every issue of The Age (and The Sunday Age) and The Australian during the 12–13 weeks to voting day, to assess those newspapers’ handling of this debate. Accordingly, the column-centimetres of print (excluding headlines) devoted to each side of the topic were carefully recorded.

Material was sub-divided into news/comment, editorials, opinion pieces, and letters (full and brief) published, classifying each as pro- or anti-republic or neutral in tone. Summary results are given in the accompanying charts.

The manner of classification into ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Neutral’ is central to the outcome: one reader’s bias is another’s fair reporting. Editorials, opinion pieces and letters generally speak for themselves, but the classification of news/comment is bound to be contentious. Accordingly examples are given, to invite evaluation of that classification. (News and comment, once scrupulously separate, are now routinely merged by many journalists, hence their combination for present purposes).

News/comment took many forms:

- Simple reporting of facts, such as Brendan Nicholson’s ‘Now or never: Costello’ (The Age, 1 November, page 1) or Mike Steketee’s ‘Poll unlocks the yes vote’ (The Australian, 25 October, page 1). Both were classified ‘neutral’.
- Articles slanted to the ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ case. Scott Emerson’s ‘Two eras—one way forward’ (The Australian, 6-7 November, page 9), featuring youthful Juliet Mitchell and centenarian Ted Smout, was clearly in the ‘Yes’ category. ‘Whitlam pillories PM’s fear’ (Steve Connolly and Lyall Johnson, The Age, 28 October, page 4) was another such. By contrast, and despite its headline, Dennis Shanahan’s ‘PM’s case falls short on symbols’ (The Australian, 27 October, page 6) presented the ‘No’ case favourably.
- Articles of strongly ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ persuasion, yet with an opposite or neutral segment. ‘PM warned to stay out of debate’ (Brendan Nicholson, The Age, 2 November, page 6), allotted 25cm to the ‘Yes’ side and 2cm to ‘No’. Ben Holgate’s ‘Cultural spirits rally for republic’ (The Australian, 5 November, page 19) devoted 41cm to ‘Yes’, 4cm to ‘No’ and 5cm ‘Neutral’. With all such ‘divided’ articles, the appropriate lengths were allocated to the ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Neutral’ tallies.
- Opinion pieces masquerading as news/comment. A good example with a ‘Yes’ bias was Paul Kelly’s ‘Costello offers alternative vision for conservatives’ (The Australian, 28 October, page 1).
- News/comment consisting of a puff from ‘Yes’ voting celebrities. A notable example was ‘It’s time but a republic wasn’t meant to be easy’ (Michael Gordon, The Age, 5 November, page 1), with former Prime Ministers Fraser and Whitlam hand in hand with Premier Bracks. ‘Dad reigned at Winton’s royal parade’ (Matt Price, The Australian, 28 October, page 7) was another.

Notably impartial reporters were Nicolas Rothwell (The Australian) and Tony Wright (The Age). By contrast, Graeme Leech, who edited most Melba columns in The Australian during the period, appears to have presented the most consistently one-sided viewpoint.

During the survey period, two other major events occurred: East Timor’s referendum and subsequent unrest, and the long-drawn-out Victorian State election. These probably accounted for the dearth of republic material at certain times, especially in the Opinion sections.

Now to the results. Considering news/comment first, there was not one week when column-centimetres for ‘Yes’ did not exceed those for ‘No’, usually overwhelmingly. This was true of both newspapers. Indeed, in only four of the twelve weeks did even ‘Neutral’ exceed ‘Yes’ in The Australian. In The Age, that balance was seven weeks to six.

The results in summary for the full 12- or 13-week periods are embodied in the charts below. For The Australian, the news/comment total for ‘Yes’ was 4,246cm. ‘No’ came to 1,468cm, and ‘Neutral’ totalled 4,276cm. Thus ‘Yes’ overshadowed ‘No’ by almost three to one.

For The Age, news/comment was even more unequal, with ‘Yes’ totalling 2,531cm, ‘No’ 530cm and ‘Neutral’ 2,835cm. The ‘Yes’-to-‘No’ ratio was nearly five to one (although, as indicated above, ‘Neutral’ news/comment in The Age was slightly greater than ‘Yes’ material, whereas in The Australian, ‘Yes’ material even exceeded ‘Neutral’).

It is obviously a newspaper’s right to express its own view in its editori-
als. Thus every relevant leading article in both papers, without exception, urged readers to vote 'Yes'.

In the opinion pieces, most readers would hope to see a roughly equal division for and against a proposition as fundamental as changing Australia's Constitution. Space in both papers, however, was allocated not much less than two to one in favour of 'Yes'.

Happily, the spread of views among Letters to the Editor (presumably reflecting roughly the 'balance' of such letters received) was more even, with The Australian's ratio eight to seven favouring 'Yes', and The Age's six to five in favour of 'No'.

The Age may have convinced inner-city voters, but clearly failed to sway the wider population. Could it be that the relentless urgency with which these newspapers (particularly The Australian) pressed their case rebounded upon them? Or perhaps that the uniformity of views expressed simply made some readers suspicious? To adapt Emerson, 'the louder they proclaimed the advantages of the republic, the faster we voters counted the blessings of the present system'.

Dr Nancy Stone is Secretary of The Samuel Griffith Society. (Ph: 02 9810 3792; Web: http://www.samuelgriffith.org.au/). This is a version of a paper delivered to the Twelfth Conference of The Samuel Griffith Society in Sydney, on 12 November, 2000. In evidence to the Press Council, The Australian cited her paper as 'an independent study'. (The Australian, 9 February 2001).

IPA

When Professor John Heningham of the University of Queensland surveyed journalists, they ranked the 7.30 Report, ABC News and Four Corners as the most pro-Labor media outlets. Yet the ABC is being lauded by journalists as if there were no serious issue of bias.

The ABC's favourite intellectuals—John Ralston Saul, David Suzuki, Noam Chomsky and, for old times' sake, John Kenneth Galbraith—show a clear ideological pattern. You have to go back almost 25 years and the Blamey View to the last time the ABC showcased a conservative intellectual—a ludicrous dereliction of duty by our national broadcaster during a dramatic resurgence in conservative and classical liberal thought.

Defenders of the ABC talk as if it is a corrective to commercial media. Yet the prime corrupter of modern media is not the overrated bogey of commercialism, it is the culture of virtue; the parading of opinions to display the virtue of the journalist or commentator, such as their republican virtue. This culture of virtue is particularly intense in the ABC.

Australia cannot afford to spend well over half-a-billion dollars a year on an organisation not accountable for the quality of its product. That the ABC is protected by a media bodyguard strengthens the argument for its abolition and replacement.

Michael Warby is a Fellow of the IPA.