

The Referendum Debate: A Note on Press Coverage

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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 numbers of 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 Stekette'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 Aus-*

tralian, 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 editor-

Musing...

Media Culture

by MICHAEL WARBY

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 *Blainey 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.

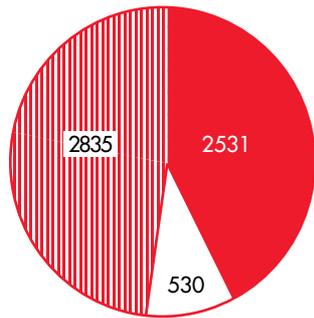
Defenders of the ABC talk as if it is a corrective to commercial media. Yet the prime corrupter of modern media is not the overrated bogey of commercialism, it is the culture of virtue; the parading of opinions to display the virtue of the journalist or commentator, such as their republican virtue. This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

To be a defender of the ABC is to be of the virtuous: to be a critic is to be not of the virtuous. Thus the media culture of virtue defends the ABC. This frustrates making the ABC accountable, since journalists become partisans, wishing to close down debate.

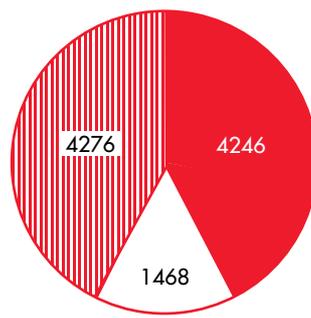
Australia cannot afford to spend well over half-a-billion dollars a year on an organisation not accountable for the quality of its product. That the ABC is protected by a media bodyguard strengthens the argument for its abolition and replacement.

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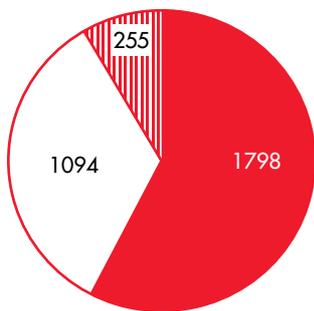
The Age: News/comment totals



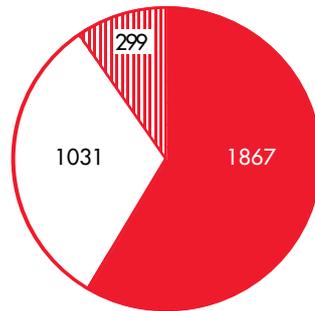
The Australian: News/comment totals



The Age: Opinion piece totals



The Australian: Opinion piece totals



||||| Neutral □ No ■ Yes

Notes: 1. Figures in pie charts indicate total number of column-centimetres.
2. Total articles read—*The Age*: 331; *The Australian*: 522.
3. Figures for *The Australian* do not include the 19-page booklet, 'Royalty or republic: your guide to the referendum'.

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 referendum was lost convincingly, in every State and the Northern Territory. The quality press' advocacy, as exemplified by *The Age* and

The Australian, 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'.

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