

# Kennett and the media: How it worked

## STEPHEN MAYNE

This is a transcript of the lecture given by Stephen Mayne at the RSA 'Threats to Democracy' Conference in Warburton on October 29-31 last year.

References to 'current events' should be read in that light.

Stephen Mayne is a journalist and a former member of Jeff Kennett's Media Unit. His web site «jeffed.com» was credited with having a significant influence on the result of the 1999 state election. About 250,000 people visited the site before the election, which is approximately the size of the swing against the Kennett government. Stephen now operates a highly recommended independent web site «crikey.com.au» which critically examines politics, the media and corporate affairs.

Jeff Kennett had 10 years in opposition. I think it's fair to say he got pretty terrible press over that period. A lot of people would argue that was justified because he was stuffing up all over the place, he delivered his famous line about the Italian beauty contest and so on. Yet, going back and looking at the media coverage he received during that time, Kennett did get a pretty raw deal from the press overall.

The best example of the media failing in their duties back in the Cain/Kirner years probably occurred in the lead-up to the 1988 election. Cain rushed to the polls early with a short campaign — at the same time as the footy finals — and the VEDC story was running very big in the Herald. But the Sun, which — like the Herald Sun today — was the most important media for any politician to have onside, did not run with the story. Nor did The Age. Cain got back in. Jeff was very bitter about that.

## **Divide and rule**

So when he got into office with a landslide, he took that memory with him. Jeff had clear strategies of how he was going to deal with the media — basically, to divide and rule. His approach was to play favorites, to marginalise his critics and to open up as many battle fronts as possible for media opponents, political opponents, unions and the rest. To thin out the ranks of the opposition. I first joined the media unit three months after the government got in. Alan Stockdale said to me that they deliberately hadn't hired any press secretaries in the first three months, when we had the so-called revolution. There were amaz-

ing things happening every day, because we didn't want to worry about marketing too much; we just wanted to get on with the revolution. So you had a large number of different reform programs breaking out on various fronts, and only three press secretaries in the whole government media unit managing the process.

## **The Kennett Media Unit**

After the initial three month period, Jeff decides that perhaps we did need some more press secretaries — three is just not enough when you have 22 ministers. Traditionally, every minister has their own press secretary in their own office, but Jeff had three for the entire government. He was determined to maintain control over the flow of information to the media, so he set up the media unit — known as the Ministry of Truth.

Neville Wran had a media unit which worked very well; John Cain in the early years had a media unit which a lot of his ministers resented. People like Marie Tehan and Alan Brown ran campaigns internally to have the media unit disbanded, so they could each have their own press secretary. Because ministers who can't control what they do with the media can't really promote themselves or run their own agenda — and Jeff knew that very well. So he then hired another four press secretaries, lifting the number to seven. He had three press secretaries for himself, and four of us were looking after the other 21 ministers. This was an incredible experience: you would be working 80 hours a week and the phone would not stop ringing.

There was one guy there supporting Ian Smith who

had nine other ministers he had to deal with. I remember having four ministers: Alan Stockdale, Finance Minister, Ian Smith, a different Ian Smith, Roger Hallam on Work-Cover and Jim Plowman who was the Energy and Mining Minister. It was just ridiculous, you couldn't work up strategies.

## **The Kennett/ Stockdale revolution**

Alan Stockdale should have had two press secretaries. He was embarking on the most amazing, radical, privatisation, outsourcing and budget cutting program arguably of any Treasurer in the world, and there was just no marketing. Anyway, by the time they got through to the end of 1993, Jeff then decided that, no, we needed a few more press secretaries.

Jeff started off not really worrying about media management. He was just getting on with the revolution. But he finished up, at the end of his term of office, with something like 15 press secretaries all working for him. By the end he was putting virtually all of his efforts into media management. He talked about having a horizon out to 2050 or 2060. Yet you would not come across a politician more obsessed with the next headline, more concerned about that little line on talkback radio.

The way he reacted to his critics showed him to be incredibly sensitive and an incredible control freak. A friend of mine's father was the head of the Victorian Farmers Federation and he was quoted on ABC Regional Radio saying that there was no Sunset Boulevard in Ouyen. In other words, we should have more resources going to the bush. Kennett pulled him aside at a conference he saw him at and gave him an absolute bollocking. He tore strips off him and told him that he would never get any access to him again if he uttered another word of criticism publicly. So it was quite an amazing transition: from virtually no media resources, to complete and utter focus and obsession with the media.

## **Jeff and The Herald Sun**

Now I'll focus on various media outlets and explain the relationship the government — or Jeff — had with



them and exactly what was going on. Clearly, the most important is the Herald Sun. It sells 560,000 papers a day and has the highest penetration of any newspaper in the world in its readership area. 40% of Victorian households get the Herald Sun. If you think about it, New South Wales has a population of 1 million more than Victoria, yet the Daily Telegraph — the local Murdoch tabloid — only sells 430,000. So if you are going to be in office, you just have to have the Herald Sun on side.

When Murdoch was going through his financial crisis in 1990, he merged the Herald and the Sun. Now the Sun was a fairly neutral paper, a tabloid that sold up to 600,000 per day. It didn't have editorials, it didn't really take very strong stands on issues. The Herald was a broadsheet, and was far more aggressive. It campaigned on the VEDC, it was a hard-hitting paper, and it was a competitor to The Age. When Murdoch put the two papers together he brought in a

chap called Piers Akerman. I actually had a conversation with him two days ago. He is a very bright guy, he's got a mind like a steel trap, but he's an absolute industrial thug. I have never seen anyone manage staff worse than Piers and he is completely to the right, an absolute union-hater.

So from that day, the Sun became the Herald Sun and it was a completely different newspaper. It was just running a ridiculous right-wing campaign distorting all the facts. It was basically an arm of the government. My major criticism as a journalist of the Herald Sun — and I personally have had a lot of problems with Labor's financial issues, particularly the last two years under Joan Kirner — is that it didn't need to distort or campaign. You could actually cause a landslide with good investigative journalism. The facts spoke for themselves: the spending figures, problems with the State Bank, Tricontinental.

But, that very day the Herald Sun put itself on a course of blind loyalty to Jeff Kennett. Murdoch knew

what the paper was doing. And that blind faith played itself out right until the morning of the day the independents were making the decision about who they were going to back. The Herald Sun, in a last ditch effort, published a front-page editorial imploring the independents to back Jeff. To the last, the Herald Sun was blindly loyal to Kennett.

## **Gag story brings down the government**

The great irony of what happened in this last election is that despite its strident support for the government, it was a Herald Sun story which ironically turned the election. They didn't want this to happen, but even the Herald Sun took exception to the gag and it was the Herald Sun which really made it an issue. Hurtle Lupton, the Liberal member for Knox, was appearing on the 3AW breakfast show each Monday. Because he had a cute name and he was a bit of fun, somehow he got this regular gig. The first Monday of the campaign he was all set to go on and at 6.50am Jeff was meeting with Steve Murphy and staff, to discuss campaign strategy, and Jeff decided to pull the plug. He said no, no, we don't want individual candidates talking to the mainstream media. Of course, the last thing you ever want to do to radio shock jocks with big egos is leave them in the lurch at the last minute. It offends them no end every time. That's exactly what Jeff did.

Murphy rang up 6.50am and said that Lupton was not coming on. Why?

Candidates were not to speak with metropolitan media. So off the 3AW boys went, moaning, complaining for about 10 minutes on the Monday morning. Peter Blunden, editor of the Herald Sun, heard this. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Herald Sun and the 3AW. They all know and listen to each other, read each other's stories, and follow each other. They basically supported Jeff Kennett blindly. Peter Blunden, to his credit, actually took a strong stand. He rang his state political writer, Damon Johnson, at 4.00pm that afternoon after they had discussed it in the afternoon.

He said 'right, this is what we are doing. I want you to ring 10 MPs and put three questions to them and get them to comment. Then put the same three questions to 10 Labor candidates and get them to comment.' Obviously the idea was that the Liberal MPs would not comment. If you actually look at that front page — the most important front-page story in the last year in Victoria — the headline was 'SILENCE'. There were pictures of the 10 MP's who would not comment with 'no comment' under all of them.

The irony is that this was really a bit of a beat-up. The order went out at 4.00pm — which is really too late to be able to contact all the MPs and to give them time to get back. So the 'no comment' tag was attributed to four of them who actually did not get the message. They had not been reached. When a predetermined front page, with a predetermined conclusion, is ordered by the editor, then the reporters often have to distort and tweak it up a bit to actually meet the instructions. This is exactly what happened.

The rest of the media were so used to the Herald Sun being supportive of the Government, we automatically thought it must be dreadful if the Herald Sun is even critical of it. The 'gag' story took off. That night the 7.30 Report did 5-6 minutes on it, the rest of the papers went after it. Labor to its credit was very nimble and produced those excellent ads with all the ministers gagged and Jeff Kennett created a huge problem for himself. He may have cut the campaign length down from 33 days to 25 days but he still left this huge vacuum for someone to fill. He got an absolute godsend from Timor which filled the vast majority of the vacuum, but there still had to be state election stories. The state election story that got the most coverage was the gag, and people took strong objection to that. It was an offensive notion.

I remember actually sitting at lunch last week at the launch of Glen Wheatley's book. Graham 'Richo' Richardson — who was meant to be chairing the SOCOG board meeting discussing the ticketing crisis — had come out and sat opposite me for two hours, drinking wine and chatting with Glen Wheatley, having a good old laugh while his board meeting worried about the ticketing fiasco. We had a long chat about the campaign, and he said that in everything he has seen in 20 years in politics, he has never seen anything as mad as that. The gag is mad. It was always mad, but became extremely damaging when the Herald Sun put it on the front page. This illustrates the power of the Herald Sun.

## **Kennett and The Age**

I mentioned about 1988 how The Age was presented with a whole range of documents on the VEDC by David Wilson (who later went to the Sunday Herald Sun) and Peter Alford, the other Jeff press secretary (now with The Australian in Bangkok). Damien Murphy, The Age's state political reporter (now of the Sydney Morning Herald) was blamed by the Liberals for not running with it. This highlights one of the worst features of Australian journalism in my view, something not equally evident in the UK — we have an obsession, as journalists, about breaking our own stories. The mentality in Melbourne

tends to be that if you don't break the story you ignore it.

That's a dreadful concept. If one outlet gets a great story then the other outlets tend to ignore it, even if it is a serious issue of public interest that needs to be addressed. The best example of that was in the 1996 Victorian campaign. Labor leaked to the 3AW Breakfast show that Liz Proust's performance criteria in her five year contract as head of the Department of Premier and Cabinet was to sack another 60,000 public sector workers to get the numbers down from 260,000 to 200,000. Now this was an extraordinary performance clause: you'll get another \$250,000 if you sack another 60,000 workers.

Herald Sun editor Peter Blunden, then only a few weeks into the job after being a Murdoch editor in the one paper town of Adelaide, was so annoyed that Labor had given it to the 3AW Breakfast show that he refused to run it. The Age the next day splashed with it, as they should have. It was a great story and the news editor of the Herald Sun snuck a few pars back in the paper against the editor's orders, because he just couldn't believe that the Herald Sun was not running it.

### ***The Age and Intergraph***

And look at the ambulance coverage during the election. It was The Age's story, and they ran really big with it. In my view they ran too big with it because they were overreacting to accusations of bias. But the Herald Sun just tried to ignore or downplay it, in part because they didn't break the story. The mentality should be that great stories will be covered everywhere, and whoever breaks the story will be given due credit. Develop the story, find a new angle. This just doesn't happen and that's something which has really worked against the public interest in Victoria. It's something Jeff Kennett had exploited no end with his divide-and-conquer media strategy. He knows that if The Age is getting up a negative story and he can see it coming, he will leak a more positive version to The Herald Sun and hopefully that will neuter The Age. The Age will then say, oh well, the Herald has the story, so we won't run it.

### ***Leaks to The Herald Sun over DPP***

The best example of that I can remember was the initial draft legislation on the destruction of the independence of the DPP (Department of Public

Prosecutions). The DPP threatened Jeff with contempt of court. As sure as night follows day, he then worked up this outrageous legislation which basically neutered the DPP and took away his powers to bring contempt action. Contempt actions now have to be brought by the Attorney-General. The Sunday Age was leaked the story and they were going to write it up — they had a copy of the draft legislation. Sure

enough, late on the Friday, the Herald Sun gets a magic leak and splashes with 'Reforms to the DPP' — he's been blowing the budget, he's being doing this and that, he's upset the police by charging some of them with murder, and we are therefore going to restructure the office. It read like an anti-DPP story. It is a sad state of affairs, but that's the way the media management happens.

### ***Kohler takes over at The Age***

Alan Kohler was appointed editor of The Age shortly before Jeff was elected. Kohler was a former editor of the Financial Review. He was the first major editorial change since Conrad Black took over control of Fairfax in 1991. He was expected to shift the paper slightly back to the right, because previous editor Mike Smith had openly said that his brief was to keep it slightly to the left. There was still a view in some quarters that the paper had been a little bit too supportive of the Kirner government in the last years; but then again, there was also an argument that the Herald Sun had gone so ridiculously the other way that someone had to present a slightly different perspective on things. Kohler came in with a view to being more positive towards Jeff. There was a need for reforms and he supported him in the first three to six months on all the major reforms even though a lot of it was mishandled. The fact that we got 100,000 people on the streets did show that the government had mishandled public opinion after getting elected with such a huge landslide.

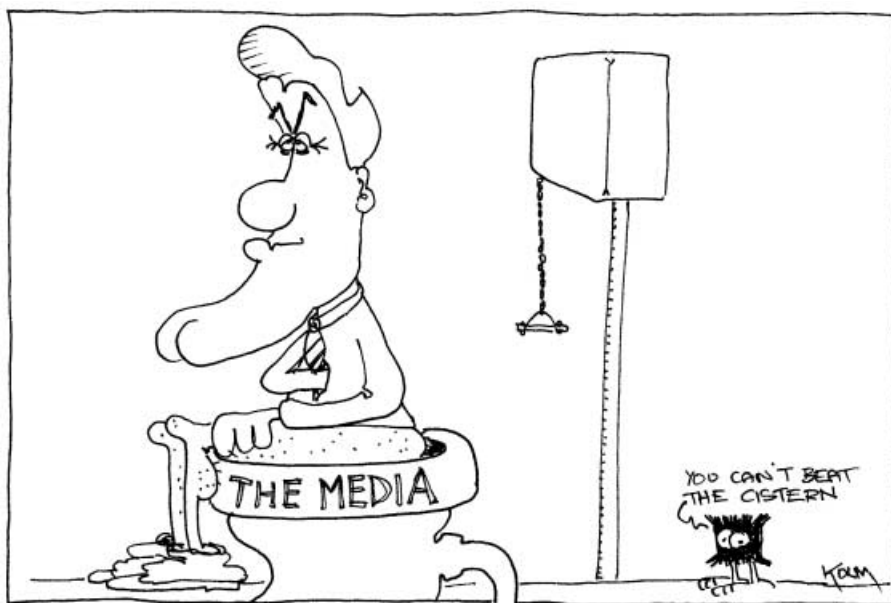
But then the Kennett-Age relationship completely fell apart over KNF, the Kennett family's advertising business. The Age got the story. Russell Skelton, the Age's political correspondent, had come back from the 7.30 Report at this point. He got a series of stories on KNF and they ran hard with the story. Kennett then ran an amazing campaign against Kohler. He was ringing up Michael Hoy, who was

*'this was an extraordinary performance clause: you'll get another \$250,000 if you sack another 60,000 workers'*

deputy chief executive; he was ringing the board. Basically after six months they had no relationship for the last 18 months. Kennett campaigned to get him ousted. But in the end, the problem with his campaign was that he did not deal with the issue of who would succeed Kohler.

### **Guthrie succeeds Kohler**

Jeff couldn't have gotten anyone worse appointed to The Age — from his point of view — than Bruce Guthrie. That's what he got when Kohler moved on.



When Bruce Guthrie was appointed to The Age, he actually told his staff that his relationship with Kennett was the biggest factor which worked against him in debates and discussions with the board. But they did not have anyone else and Bruce was a great editor, he had already done a good job with the Sunday Age, so he got the job. So Kennett thought he had had a victory, but then he had a bigger battle on his hands because Bruce Guthrie was a more aggressive, harder-hitting editor than Alan Kohler.

The campaign that Kennett ran against Bruce Guthrie I think everyone is fairly well aware of. He rang the board on a regular basis, he campaigned against journalists, he would not give them any stories and so on. He did not once speak to Bruce Guthrie in the three years that Bruce Guthrie was editor — an extraordinary situation. At this point he was still ringing Steve Harris — who is now chief executive of The Age and was then editor-in-chief of the Herald Sun — three or four times a week. They literally had hundreds of conversations, and the government and the Herald Sun had a very cosy relationship. The Age was effectively in Siberia, with no access, no dialogue and a public smear campaign. The bile Jeff used to throw out against The Age, during

his Thursday morning spot on 3AW, was quite extraordinary. 'You wouldn't wrap your dead fish in it' — that kind of stuff.

### **Guthrie gets sacked**

Guthrie eventually got sacked and went to New York and worked for People Magazine. (He is now editor of Who Weekly out of Sydney). I went to New York on holiday and caught up with him for a couple of hours. He told me a couple of very interesting tales. One was the sequence of events by which he was eventually sacked.

It was around the time that Crown was opened. Lloyd Williams, Crown boss, was also campaigning against Guthrie. The wife of Gary O'Neil, who is the public affairs manager at Crown, actually asked Bruce at the Casino opening: 'don't you know that you're about to be sacked?' Bruce did not know this. Obviously Kennett had been having discussions with the Fairfax board and as the pressure built The Age received about six writs in the weeks leading up to the Casino opening. The strategy was to get several critics of Guthrie and supporters of Jeff

bombarding the papers with writs. Copies would then be sent to Bob Muscat, the Fairfax chief executive, in Sydney. The message was: 'Guthrie is out of control, you gotta sack this guy.'

Anyway, Jeff then goes on 3AW for his weekly broadcast and claims that they are all corrupt at the Age, and that the circulation figures are all wrong because they have been giving the paper away for \$2 a week. John Reynolds, who was the managing director of The Age, took great exception to this. To be accused of running a corrupt business is clearly very defamatory. He rang Bob Muscat and said that it was outrageous. Bob Muscat said: 'look, I'll talk to Jeff — just leave it to me'. So he has dinner with Jeff and around the same time he has a meeting with Lloyd. Lloyd shows him a video, an ABC documentary, where they went inside the Sunday Age conference room and Bruce Guthrie was captured on film criticising Jeff. He compared Kennett's Victoria to Eastern Europe. Now it was a bit of a throwaway line, but it was subsequently used against Guthrie in the campaign to get rid of him.

Picture this: a meeting at the casino, the casino chairman showing a video of the editor of The Age to the Chief Executive of Fairfax, illustrating why he

should be sacked. Sure enough, he got the sack — he got a full year's pay on his contract and the annual report of Fairfax shows that got \$1.2 million, so Bruce did quite well out of it in the end. But it was an extraordinary campaign. Yet even worse was the way the Fairfax board decided to deal with the matter: rather than sticking up for independent journalism, they decided they would try to 'out Herald Sun' the Herald Sun. They hired Steve Harris, who came across from the Herald Sun. Most would agree that he had done a good job in steadying the Herald Sun ship after it had been through some rough patches under Akerman. He built up the credibility of the paper again.

### ***Guthrie campaign damages democracy***

But Harris's relationship with Kennett — which was very close — was in part what the Fairfax board was after. This, in my view, was truly damaging for democracy in Victoria: you no longer had a media outlet prepared to really have a go. By that point the 7.30 Report was obviously still banned; at seven years, this is the longest ban in Australian political history I can think of. He also banned Peter Couchman on 3LO.. But by that stage he was embarking on his FM radio strategy: soft, chummy interviews with Dougie Hawkins and Jason Dunstall and all the lads, who would ask all the easy, fluffy questions. And let's not forget the warm and fuzzy interviews on TTFM with the wife of his press secretary, Deb Clarke. You had complete support from the Herald Sun; then you suddenly had the Herald Sun guy running The Age. The question was where were you now going to get your hard-hitting independent criticism of Jeff. The 7.30 Report by this stage had gone national, so you not only had no access to Jeff but very little Melbourne airtime. Jeff successfully painted them as being left-wing and used to successfully get up and run the line that the ABC should be closed down.

### ***Media fails to support each other***

No one else in the media actually stood up and defended the ABC. That, in my view, is one of the other great tragedies: the industry in Victoria failing to support each other. Mary Delahunty actually made a good point before the election about the way the media conducted itself in Queensland and New South Wales when under other similar attacks. When Nifty Neville Wran attempted to ban This Day Tonight on the ABC, the rest of the gallery got together and refused to deal with Nifty until the ban was lifted. The same applied to Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen with Andrew Olle. He tried to ban the ABC and the rest of the gallery said no, we won't have this, we will not deal with you until the ban is lifted. No Premier

can get by without talking to any media or having all the media hostile to them.

They were, in effect, a press gallery union. And that's what should have happened in Melbourne. As a press secretary, I agree that the 7.30 Report was too far to the left in the early Kennett years with Mary Delahunty as host. You would produce a budget and they would come at you with supercritical, unfair pieces. They refused to accept the reality that the budget was better off in the black, we had been downgraded three times and you had to do something. I thought you could sustain a short term ban on them until maybe there were some changes, but you could not just have a blanket ban for 7 years, particularly when the 7.30 Report had changed some of their personnel. The ban should have been lifted as soon as Mary Delahunty left. And the rest of the media should have ensured that happened, but they didn't.

Not once did the Herald Sun ever editorialise and support media freedom, and criticise manipulative attacks on the media by politicians. Jeff played the game of 'divide and rule' supremely well. He played off individual journalists against each other. His attitude to the press gallery was: if a journalist asked a question he liked, he used their name. When asked a question he didn't like, he wouldn't use their name.

### ***Kennett and 3AW***

We all know the importance of 3AW in the Jeff machine. 350 hours of interviews with Neil Mitchell versus about 5 hours Bracks and John Brumby got in seven years on Mitchell. It is an extraordinary set of circumstances for that to happen. The ABC has this policy, particularly during election campaigns, where they give equal time. Even after getting criticised for their bias and unfair allocation of airtime, 3AW was running around saying we have given equal time during the last election when they hadn't. Bracks was scheduled for three 1-hour slots with Mitchell or with Price, and all of them got cut back to about 35 minutes or less, on the grounds that Timor had come up or some other big news story had broken. To the last, even during the campaign 3AW wasn't allocating time fairly. I found it extraordinary that 3AW and all its connections to the Liberal party could go unremarked for so long. They were the key power base after the Herald Sun. Neil Mitchell usually asked Jeff more questions each week than the rest of the gallery combined. He had better access to Jeff than many of his ministers did.

Victorian politics often revolved around Jeff's one-hour slot on 3AW every Thursday morning. Often we at the Herald Sun held off on a story because the only time that Jeff could be put on the spot, or forced

to face a series of questions in a row, was on the Thursday slot. Occasionally, you would ring up the producer to try to brief him, or you would get business columnist Terry McCrann to ring up and talk up your story before Jeff went on. This was a ridiculous state of affairs. Apart from his weekly commitment on 3AW, Jeff would simply go to ground whenever he liked. If you go back and look at the papers, most of the anti-Kennett stories ran or were broken on a Thursday. Sometimes you would find yourself in a queue with the Labor party. I deliberately timed the announcement of my Burwood campaign for the Wednesday, so that Jeff would be asked on the Thursday, but Labor had dropped four or five things to different outlets, so Mitchell already had a long list of issues to go through. His time was at a premium.

There were other connections with 3AW which were quite amazing. Most media outlets would try to be independent, and to have a policy not to give political donations. Fairfax have a policy never to make political donations, as all media companies should. You're in a position to potentially make or break governments, and the last thing you should be doing is paying political parties. PBL doesn't have this policy. The chairman of 3AW, Peter Nixon, is a former National Party Minister in Canberra. I would submit that a radio station which gloats in its annual report that it is 'the most influential radio station in Melbourne' should not have an ex-politician as its chairman. Equally, if you look at the other connections with 3AW, why was Paul Cronin filling in on Nightline during the campaign when, at the same time, he was the voice of all those Liberal party ads?

Bernie Fin, the (thankfully) former Liberal member for Tullamarine, used to work for 3AW. Ian Cover, who made his name on 3AW, is seemingly never to be heard of again after winning an eight year sinecure in the Upper House. The connections go on and on. When Neil Mitchell was going on holidays, Steve Price actually wanted Jeff to host the show for four hours for a week. Have you ever heard anything like that? When Jeff Kennett was looking around for three people to do an independent report on the Auditor General, who did he turn to? He turned to the Crown Casino auditor, a 3AW director and one other guy. The Southern Cross Broadcasting share price is a great example of how Jeff could not only produce ratings, but profits as well. 3AW was described in *The Age* as being in the ratings wilderness in 1991. Now, suddenly, they are number one, the most influential station, and access to Jeff Kennett has been a big part of that story. Southern Cross Broadcasting shares were priced at 80c in 1992, and I had to pay \$8.15 when I brought shares recently. The Herald Sun profits have been far stronger than the *Age's* over the last seven

years. Jeff seriously damaged the *Age's* business, and that's what got the board moving in its hiring of Steve Harris.

### ***Lack of diversity on television***

As far as TV is concerned, the saddest thing is the lack of diversity. We used to have a hard-hitting, state-based current affair show called *Today Tonight* on Channel 7, hosted by Jill Singer. As most people would remember, it was Jill Singer's show which first broke the Jeff Kennett share trading story. Jeff obviously ran a hard campaign against the four journalists involved in the story — who were all sacked at the end of the year, even though they were runners-up in the Walkley Awards for the best investigative TV story of the year. Since when do television stations sack award-winning journalists? It happens in Victoria. The ABC's 7.30 Report went national, *Today Tonight* went soft and Channel 10 does nothing. That just leaves *A Current Affair* and *Sixty Minutes*. You didn't see anyone having much of a go at Jeff over the last seven years on Channel Nine. I don't know if they did any stories that were particularly hard-hitting.

### ***Four Corners the only real goer***

Four Corners had five goes at Jeff in seven years. They covered the ambulances controversy, they covered the DPP, they did Crown Casino, police corruption and Kennett's share dealings. The last three were all done by Sally Neighbour, who is an outstanding journalist. They made five attempts, but not once did Jeff speak to them. When the flagship of the national broadcaster spends 45 minutes on a big issue, you'd think he would at least talk to them. But he didn't talk to Four Corners once. Even after the police corruption story, he said — sight unseen — that it was all rubbish, the ABC should be shut down, and what a waste of money. I actually watched that show and thought it was extraordinary. It was making very serious allegations about police corruption and how the Ombudsman had failed to follow up on a series of very substantial complaints. You would think if you were a normal Premier you'd say we always look at any allegations of corruption and we are going to have a look it. To attack it straight off — as Jeff did — is extraordinary. But that was just the way Jeff did things. You were with him or you were against him. The ABC was against him, so no matter what they said, no matter what they did, he would attack them and call for them to be scrapped.

### ***Defeating Kennett***

As everyone now knows, we all underestimated how well Labor campaigned in the bush, and how sick country people were of Jeff and his Melbourne-cen-



tric government. The bush was the biggest single thing that got Labor's vote up. Labor was expecting it; but the city swing came as a surprise. What caused the city swing? Three or four things happened. Firstly, I put my website out on the Sunday two weeks before the election. I always knew that given most of the media was in Jeff's pocket, the only way you could do any good in Burwood, in my view, was to get some publicity to begin with, playing the rules normally. Then I planned to attack most of the commercial media via the net, to hopefully embarrass them into writing about a few pertinent matters. Media Watch, Triple J, 3LO and hopefully the ABC generally would hopefully give it some exposure and then the plan was so hard copy mail everyone in the electorate directly. The net was an efficient way of communicating with the electorate. Jeff had used the net as a political tool himself. When he had his site [jeff.com.au](http://jeff.com.au) and I registered the domain name [Jeffed.com](http://Jeffed.com), I knew that a net campaign was the best option.

### **Talking to Lyneham**

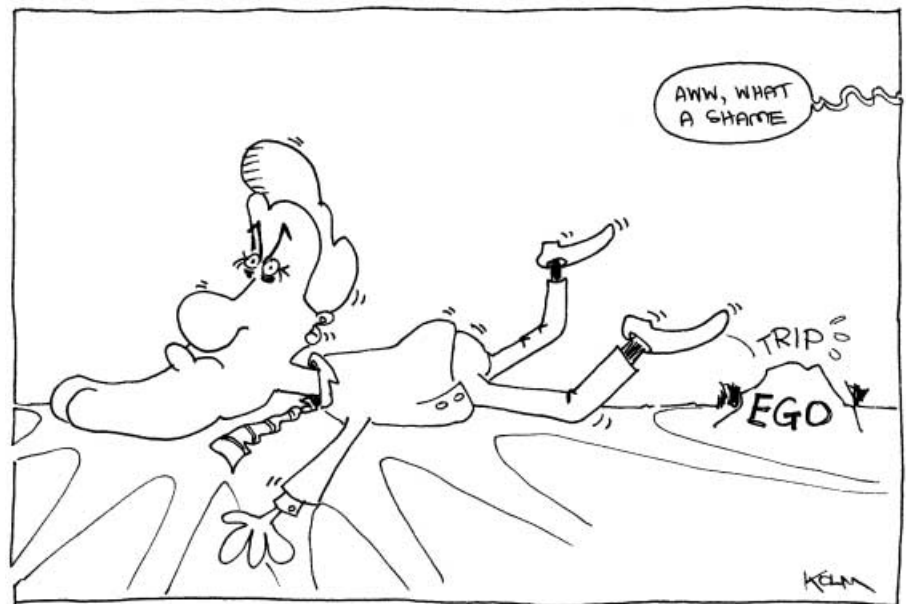
So I did that on the Saturday night and on the Sunday morning it was first published. That night I had dinner with Paul Lyneham at Channel 9 and he was doing a piece for Sixty Minutes. I said can you think of anything negative that Nine has done in seven years? What Paul Lyneham did on that last Sunday of the campaign was very strongly negative in my view towards Jeff and the nature of Neil Mitchell's attacks on Lyneham the next day actually reflected that. I had spent about six hours with Lyneham that week filling him full of my theories, being an anti-Kennett spinner if you like. Lyneham is very much his own man and had also heard plenty of negative stories about Jeff from other journalistic friends. He also found him totally uncooperative when it came to doing an interview.

### **The Herald Sun's exclusive puff piece**

On the Tuesday, Peter Blunden, editor of the Herald Sun got asked by Faine about my website and the allegations of bias. He attacked me and he defended the paper as obviously he'd read the website and felt he had been attacked by me, one of his own, calling him biased, soft and weak. Then they had that notorious Herald Sun exclusive interview with Jeff — a classic. The Herald Sun got state political reporter Damon Johnston to do the interview — along with his boss,

Blunden, who presumably asked the majority of the questions given his seniority. Most of these questions were soft, weak and inane. Such as: are footy fans being looked after well enough? Answer: no. It was not exactly probing. Yet the big mistake the Herald Sun made was to precede the interview transcript with a claim it had asked the tough questions.

Anyway, I did a spoof of this on the website and I wrote up the ten questions the Herald Sun should have asked but didn't ask, and spoof answers to Jeff's questions. You know, are footy fans being looked after? Not as well as I am by the Victorian media. So most gallery journos read that. The editors and chiefs of staff are the people who are deciding what goes in the paper, so I was writing for them to try and



embarrass them. Then Jon Faine went back time and again, keeping the pressure on.

### **The Australian does its job well**

The Australian's Media writer Andrew Dodd was other key guy in all of this. Lachlan and Rupert must really be regretting establishing the media section, because you can't cover the media in The Australian without covering Murdoch. So the Australian has set up this media section on Thursday and I knew what I was saying about the media would be a big test for them. So straight away on the website I said, Big test for the Australian's independence can the media section cover the Victorian election properly given all the criticism of the Herald Sun? Thankfully, the guy who was writing all these stories for the Australian is an ex-ABC guy, Andrew Dodd, who was hired in and he wasn't part of the News Limited culture and he did a sterling job. The Australian wrote two news stories during the campaign. They wrote up Jon Faine's attack on Michael Gawenda for pub-



lishing the Angus Kennett diaries, and they also wrote up my spoof of the Herald Sun. How often do you see one Murdoch paper writing up another Murdoch paper negatively?

### **Media Watch joins the fray**

So all those things were happening slowly, putting pressure on the journalists, pressure on the editors and eventually if you look at the last week of the campaign, Media Watch got into it. They had a five-minute segment in which they attacked and exposed TTFM and Steve Murphy's wife for the first time. They attacked The Age, the Herald Sun, and 3AW and in my view The Age overreacted. In the last week of the campaign, their ambulance coverage was in my view excessive. They overcompensated because they were concerned about a repeat of 1988 when they went soft on Labor over the VEDC. So the coverage they gave it in the last week was huge. The Age had negative stories everywhere over that last week — and this all added to the 'arrogance, secrecy and no debate' message. Kennett's mad last-minute rush to court to stall the release of the ambulance documents was the last straw. Then you have the Faine interview on the last Tuesday, and the TV images that night were very damaging. Kennett was incredibly rude, and I was desperately pumping out the transcript onto the website so that everyone could read it in full.

### **Baiting 3AW**

Neil Mitchell and 3AW were still completely ignoring me, as I knew they probably would. How, I wondered, do you get them out of the bunker? How do you engage them in some kind of debate, and get jeffed.com mentioned on air? The feedback I was getting by email from people who visited the site was 98 per cent positive. Once you get them there, the news spreads through cyberspace — and it was very positive. I was happy to get into any ditch and fight with anyone just to get the Jeffed.com site mentioned. This was a political campaign run through the media as I had no money for advertising. How could I get Neil Mitchell out of the bunker? Firstly, I went on Triple J and said 3AW was a disgrace, that they were just like state radio and so on. I then published a piece on the website under the headline '3AW hardman Neil Mitchell', which said that after 350 soft interviews, Mitchell had one last chance to redeem himself. I listed 15 tough questions Mitchell should ask on the last Thursday before the campaign to show that he is not a jelly back.

A few hours later, Mitchell's producer rang up: they had seen the website, they had read the transcript of the Triple J interview. The fight was on. The Faine interview with Kennett was at 9am and I was on

Mitchell at 11am: perfect timing. I got on and Mitchell started attacking me, and I got on and asked: why can't you be like your competitor down the road? He has just asked about Robin Cooper's daughter sharing in a \$24 million contract. Why have you never ask a question like that?

He was saying that I wasn't a journalist's bottom, I was a disgrace and I had all my facts wrong. I told him that he hadn't asked any tough questions in 7 years, and that the whole press gallery thought that he was weak. Although he called himself the president of the Press Council, I pointed out, he was attacking the same journalists that Jeff was attacking. My old man listening at home thought I was being slaughtered, but I thought Mitchell's bilious attack on me was the perfect way to draw people in.

The first thing that happened was three callers rang Mitchell in complaint. The best one was an Italian man who had listened to John Faine in the morning; it was the most priceless thing I have ever heard. He asked Neil why he had not said anything about the contract awarded to Robin Cooper's daughter. As he pointed out, Jon Faine had put this question to Jeff that morning, and he had not denied it. If it was wrong, Jeff would have said he was going to sue, but he didn't, so it must be true. Mitchell finally agreed.

Then my mate and campaign director Hugo Kelly rang in and reinforced the message. So we were up to the same dirty tricks campaign that everyone else was up to. Why, we asked, didn't Mitchell ask Jeff about the Troughton Swier contract — the \$24 million contract that went to the daughter of a cabinet minister without going to tender? Sure enough, on the next day Mitchell's first question was about that. Kennett answered the question, and basically said it was all true. Everyone was asking: how can this be? One day Jeff calls Jon Faine 'a disgrace' and 'pathetic', and refuses to answer Faine's questions, saying 'I am just going to sit here and drink my tea'. The next day, Mitchell asked the same questions — and Jeff admitted that it was all true.

In ordinary circumstances, the press gallery would say that this was just Kennett being his arrogant self. But this was in the midst of an election campaign, and we had managed to embarrass Mitchell into asking some pretty hot questions — how had the minister's daughter, who was only 35, netted almost \$3 million out of a contract that hadn't gone to tender? All of this happened in the last week of the election campaign. It was all of these factors combined that gave us the anti-Jeff swing in the city, which was so over and above what people expected. The bush backlash, however, was still the biggest factor in the Kennett government's demise.