

COMMISSIONER ADDRESSES MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB

We reprint here an edited text of an address by the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, Sir Colin Woods, to the Melbourne Press Club at the Hotel Australia, Collins Street, on Tuesday, May 12, 1981.

The Federal Police came into being just over 18 months ago. For those of us who have been involved in the planning and the implementation of the Government's decision to create a new Commonwealth law enforcement agency, it sometimes seems more like 18 years!

There has been a lot of hard work and personal sacrifice by the men and women who have had large and small roles to fulfil towards achieving the Government's goal.

You, as members of the news media, would be well aware of some of the problems we have faced and, in many cases, have overcome.

You reported the industrial problems, the difficult circumstances under which we assumed the Commonwealth drugs law enforcement role and a wide range of issues that were part and parcel of the complex process of setting up the Australian Federal Police.

You also informed the public of many of the positive achievements that flowed from the creation of the Federal Police.

Not the least of these was the decision taken by Commonwealth and State Police Ministers and Commissioners to join together in the fight against drugs trafficking and organised crime.

This initiative resulted in the establishment of the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence.

Here in Melbourne you covered the story of the importation of Federal Police from other States to guard witnesses in an important trial.

This exercise was one of the biggest of its type — and certainly the most expensive — yet mounted by police in Australia.

Now that the appeals in that particular case have been dismissed I am no longer bound by the rules of sub judice. Our witness guarding operation, code-named "Operation Meatball", is now being dismantled after some seven months.

I would like to take this opportunity — without naming any names — of thanking certain individuals among the Melbourne press corps for what we perceived to be a highly responsible and restrained approach to the "Operation Meatball" story.

It is a fact that, if police are going to successfully prosecute the hardened criminals involved in large-scale drugs trafficking in Australia, we shall be seeing more operations such as "Meatball".

Newsworthy

I would commend the approach of the Melbourne news media as the model for news coverage of such operations which we police recognise as newsworthy, but also potentially dangerous if accorded overly-sensational treatment by news media.

Since taking up my appointment as Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, I do not think I have made any secret of my belief that any police force in a genuinely democratic society that aspires to gaining complete public confidence and trust, can only achieve a significant degree of confidence if it is an accountable police force.

Moreover, the police force should be seen to wish to be accountable.

In his report to the Commonwealth Government in 1978, Sir Robert Mark said:

"Accountability of the police to

the criminal law, the civil law and its own police authority, even though that be the Government itself, is not enough. . ."

How does a police force achieve and maintain accountability to the public and, through accountability, the confidence of the public?

There are many ways, but in both the short and the long term the most obvious is through the news media because the news media are the eyes and ears of the public.

In the case of a police force, the public as a whole can only make its judgment of the police through either personal experience or through hearsay.

The majority of Australians would rarely encounter police in a dramatic or profound circumstance. It is only through the news media that the public are able to form an image of the police role, of police ethics and of the merits of the proposition that the police can be trusted.

But there are several factors which tend to complicate this otherwise simple formula of police/community relations.

Journalists

The practice of police forces appointing journalists to conduct formal liaison with the media first began in the United States. The model with which I became most familiar, of course, was the Press Bureau established at New Scotland Yard.

Those of you who have worked in the United Kingdom would know that the Police Press Bureau in London provides a 24-hour service, including the release of information, the arranging of interviews and the provision of general professional assistance to the news media.

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From its inception, the Australian Federal Police operated an Office of Information from our Canberra headquarters. This office is being enlarged to meet the continuing and increasing demand placed upon it by Australian news gatherers, both at a national level and at the local level in Canberra.

We like to think that this expanding usage of our information service indicates its acceptance by you, the news media.

Before touching on some specific matters that affect the relations between us, I should like to give you a brief outline of our information policy.

We believe that when information is released it is neither fair to the news media nor to the public if we are selective in our choice of individual journalists or organisations to whom information is released.

Rather, we strive to give all news media an even break on a news story and, even in the case of more routine news releases, it is always our policy to release information to all outlets.

Confidentiality

On the other hand, where an organisation approaches us with its own initiative, we naturally seek to preserve the confidentiality of that initiative.

I believe that, by and large, this policy has proved workable and mutually acceptable. The period since the creation of the Australian Federal Police, while relatively short, has nevertheless been sufficient to enable me to take stock of the general trends in police/media relations.

But let me say that one would be totally unrealistic to suggest that, even under the most ideal conditions, the conduct of relations between the police and the media would proceed smoothly for ever-and-a-day against a background of suitably sentimental mutual admiration and trust.

The peculiar demands of police work, the need of the police to protect the privacy of individual citizens, and the legal constraints surrounding the release of information — coupled with the deadline pressures, competition and the inherent curiosity of the journalist — are more than enough to militate against our relationship ever being continually rosy.

I believe, however, that despite the obvious and unavoidable con-

licts of interest that will arise from time to time, the relationship that is evolving between the A.F.P. and the news media is deepening, based on an increasing degree of trust on both sides.

I am well aware that my force harbours a significant number of officers who still adhere to what I would term the traditional wall-lopers' attitude towards news media representatives.

And I would be less than frank if I did not confess myself that at least once a week I am given cause to feel bitter and disappointed — albeit momentarily — by the actions of various journalists or their organisations.

I appreciate that it is very difficult for a journalist to precis into four or five paragraphs the main points and outcome of a trial, or the state of play in a protracted and complex industrial relations matter, or the salient arguments of a type of socio-political issue that can be raised by, for instance, special interest groups or governmental inquiries.

I appreciate also that it is a relatively long distance betwixt the reporter's typewriter and the printed page. One example of a particularly unfortunate case of mis-reporting that occurred recently was no more than a simple transposition by a sub-editor.

In this case, the newspaper published a profuse apology the next day. But even so, I suggest the damage caused was not insignificant.

There must have been a proportion of readers of that newspaper who saw the first inaccurate report but not the correction.

Sub Judice

You may be interested to know some background of another incident — in media terms perhaps the most potentially damaging from many points of view in the history of the Australian Federal Police.

I am not going to name the newspaper, but let us say the incident was an uncharacteristic slip-up.

Basically it involved a severe infringement of sub judice rules. In an article on the illegal drugs trade, some quite specific references were made to a pair of characters who, as it happened, were currently on trial on drugs offences.

The Judge adjourned the trial while he considered whether to abort it. The police were not very optimis-

tic as to the outcome of His Honour's deliberations.

We felt at the time that the infringement was so severe that it was a more than even chance the trial would be aborted.

We started totting up the bill and estimated some \$1 million had been spent by the Government and various law enforcement agencies to bring the defendants to book.

But the potential cost of this newspaper's silly oversight could not be measured in mere dollars and cents.

At total risk was any future prosecution of these criminals over whom we had taken such pains to bring before a court. It was apparent we would have no second chance with a number of key witnesses.

One outstanding sidelight was the reaction of the police. You could not blame them, but some of the detectives and senior officers most intimately connected with the case were very angry.

They perceived not only one newspaper's mistake; the incident also gave rise to a more generalised anti-news-media feeling.

Hostility

It was an understandable reaction. The traditional hostility of police towards the news media is not very far below the surface, even in 1981.

During the 24 hours that we waited nervously for the Judge to announce his decision, there were any number of pointed — and sometimes colourful — observations about the media being uttered by numerous policemen.

It is also interesting to note here that the newspaper concerned could well have found itself heavily penalised through being ordered to pay all costs associated with the trial.

Without wishing to appear vindictive, I would like to think that the waiting and the praying for the Judge's decision to continue the trial was as tense and as harrowing for that newspaper's editors as it was for me and my officers.

Fortunately, the Judge decided to continue the trial and from the police point of view that hiccup, which could well have proved fatal, is now in the past and, I hope, no longer a blight on the prospects of better police/media relations.

Trust

Indeed, if there is one lesson to be learned from that particular incident it is this: there needs to be trust on BOTH sides if our relationship is to

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be a worthwhile one.

For example, I was prepared to trust the journalists who prepared that particular article. Not very far from here I spent an evening with them talking, more off the record than on. On recollection, I could honestly state that I put a great deal on the line that night.

What a pity that the journalists chose not to trust the Australian Federal Police and the journalists we employ. If they had taken the simple precaution of letting us read their copy, purely to check it for accuracy, the whole silly episode may well have been avoided.

In this case mutual trust would have been mutually beneficial.

It is worth adding a footnote. It is my understanding that one of the reasons the newspaper in question erred in such a profound and spectacular fashion was due to media competition. The article had been due for publication at a later date, but was hastily thrown into the paper because a competing newspaper was also undertaking a major coverage on drugs issues.

I hope I have not been unfair by singling out an offending newspaper, albeit anonymously. To maintain some balance let me now recount the most monumental foul-up perpetrated by the Australian Federal Police.

You may well have guessed already that I am referring to the anti-terrorist exercise that the Federal Police conducted in Canberra last year. Somewhere, somehow, along the line, our relations with the news media went distinctly sour.

I don't like doing it, but I have to stand here and tell you that the

blame for this debacle lay fairly and squarely with the police.

When the chips were down and the media wanted no more than to get close to the hypothetical epicentre of a hypothetical terrorist siege, one hundred years of traditional hostility suddenly asserted itself.

The police stuck in their heels and what is euphemistically called "a situation" quickly developed.

Fortunately, the media displayed more maturity than we did by promptly staging a unanimous walk-out, and that was the end of their active interest in our exercise.

I hasten to add that I was overseas at the time, but I understand television that night and newspapers the following day were a lot kinder to the Australian Federal Police than was actually warranted.

When I returned to Australia, the first thing I did was to personally apologise to representatives of all the organisations who covered our exercise.

Discussions

As many of you know there has in recent times been a series of entirely off-the-record discussions between Government officials, the police and journalists, about the rôle of the media during a major terrorist incident.

In Canberra recently I chaired the A.C.T. briefing. I had more than the usual interest in that meeting in light of our unhappy experience with our anti-terrorist exercise last year.

Towards the end of the meeting I circulated a series of resolutions that had been passed by a similar meeting of media and government

representatives in London, in the wake of the Princes Gate siege last year.

These resolutions comprise a general code of ethics that could govern police/media relations during a protracted terrorist incident.

When we adapted these resolutions for our Canberra meeting, the only change was to leave out altogether the final paragraph. This was a statement to the effect that the police need not necessarily tell journalists covering a siege that the information being given them is in fact, "disinformation".

As I said at the time, the word "disinformation" is not in the Federal Police vocabulary if we are talking about our relationship with you, the media.

Rather, if police or negotiators had to achieve a crucial objective in a hostage situation, and could only do so by getting disinformation broadcast or printed in the news media, then we would put our trust in you and explain the situation.

Conversely, it goes without saying that you would have to trust us if you were to help us achieve our objective.

Therefore, I put it to you that the building of trust between the police and the media is not just something that is desirable in the administrative sense. It could go a lot further than that.

For example, in a terrorist incident that trust could be instrumental in saving human lives.

What better reason could there be to continue working on building the relationship between the police and the media?

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

On Monday, 19 January 1981, the death occurred in Woomera Hospital of Protective Service Constable Malcolm Peter MARSH, aged 26, after a long illness. He is sadly missed by his family, his many friends and his AFP colleagues.

On the 9 November 1980 Malcolm left this country to seek expert medical treatment in Mexico, returning home shortly before Christmas. Before his departure a Division-wide appeal was launched to render every possible financial assistance to Malcolm in regard to travel, accommodation and medical costs,

and to assist his wife in maintaining the family.

The good people of Woomera, including Australian and United States servicemen and civilians, responded with astonishing generosity for which I have already publicly expressed gratitude.

On behalf of Mrs Marsh I would like now to express heartfelt gratitude to the members of the Central Division, Darwin, Alice Springs, Woomera, Port Augusta, Salisbury, Railway Squad and all those attached to Divisional Headquarters, for their kindness and generosity in supporting the appeal.

I would also like to thank our Welfare Adviser in Canberra, Mr Brian Kelly, whose interest and advice, albeit from afar, were much appreciated; and of course our own Divisional Welfare Officer, Sergeant Ron Jeffree, for his hard work and organisational skill in connection with the appeal.

Once again, our heartfelt thanks.

Yours sincerely,
PETER COOPER
Protective Service Sergeant,
Woomera Station.

See obituary page 26 — Editor.