Political corruption, accountability and the media:  
A study of motives and justifications

by

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Stephen J. Tanner

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Stephen Tanner
June 4, 1999.
Abstract

Political corruption, accountability and the media: a study of motives and justifications

This thesis is about political corruption. Specifically it is concerned with two issues: (1) the way in which people alleged to have committed a corrupt act seek to justify their actions; and (2) how the media report the process of allegation and justification which invariably occurs when such an issue becomes public. In short, the thesis is about accountability processes as they apply in Australia to elected public officials, particularly political leaders.

The thesis uses a single case study – the so-called Metherell affair in New South Wales – to argue that public figures will invariably struggle to justify conduct which has been labelled corrupt. The Metherell affair represents an important case study because it illustrates how behaviour can be variously interpreted by different groups and individuals. Conduct which is acceptable to some people, for example one’s political supporters, may not be acceptable to one’s political opponents. As such, individuals charged with political corruption will seek to apply a situational morality when attempting to justify such conduct. That task becomes even more difficult when the individual is asked to justify his or her conduct in a separate arena where different standards can be applied - in this case the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) which is governed by its own legislation which includes a particular formal-legal definition of corrupt conduct.

Likewise, the case study provides an important insight into the media’s treatment of political corruption. Looking at the treatment of this issue in four newspapers over four and a half months, the thesis shows how the media was able to both inform and entertain the reading public whilst acting fairly. The study shows that whilst the media was critical of the Premier for sanctioning the appointment which led to the Metherell affair, it did not consider him corrupt as the term is popularly understood. In this sense it played an important role in highlighting the differences between formal-legal definitions of corruption (as applied by quasi-legal bodies like the ICAC) and popular definitions which draw on a range of more subjective considerations.
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To our daughter, Emiliija, whose life has been dominated by "Daddy's PhD" and who has been inculcated into the academic life at an early age. From now on I hope to make good my promise made over her five years that there is life after a PhD.

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Richard Herr, who (like Kath) has travelled this path with me before, and has provided the academic rigour and insightful comments when they were most needed. To my associate supervisor, Dr Marcus Haward, for reading chapters, often with unreasonable deadlines imposed on him, and to other members of staff in the School of Government, particularly Della Clark and Bev Brill, for their on-going support.

To Senator Brian Gibson for the support which enabled me to undertake much of the research in Canberra. To the various people who agreed to being interviewed for this thesis, including former NSW Premier Nick Greiner, Tim Moore, Ian Temby QC, Gary Sturgess and John Hatton. To the staff at the New South Wales ICAC, including Barrie O'Keefe, QC, Dr Angela Gorta, and Peter Gifford, for providing me with access to files and transcripts. To Nick Richardson for acting as a sounding board, often over lunch or dinner when wisdom and red wine went hand in hand.

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To the numerous people I have discussed the ideas which culminated in this dissertation at conferences both within Australia and overseas.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this PhD to the memory of our youngest daughter, Lucy Kate Tanner, who shared our lives for just two weeks in late 1998 when the end was finally in sight. In that brief time she enriched our lives in a way not even a doctorate can do.
Contents

Declaration i
Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii
Contents iv
Figures viii
Tables ix
Charts x
Abbreviations xii

Chapter One: Introduction and methodology

Background 1
Aims and objectives 6
A case study approach 7
Case study data base 10
Structure 14
Conclusion 20

Chapter Two: Political corruption and accountability

Introduction 21
Understanding corruption 22
Defining ‘political corruption’ 23
Public office (formal-legal) approach 24
Public interest approach 26
Public opinion approach 29
Accountability and corruption 39
Accountability mechanisms 40
Building expectations 43
Motives, reasons and justifications 51
Invoking a situational morality 58
Conclusion 61

Chapter Three: Media and Accountability

Introduction 64
An accountability role 65
Media as a conduit 67
Public service or profit? 69
A tarnished image 72
A powerful media? 75
A manufactured ‘reality’ 76
Converting information into news 77
Politicians and the media 81
Media management strategies 83
Corruption as news 86
Identifying the constraints 88
Promoting an anti-corruption role 94
Balancing the good and bad 96
Conclusion 99
Chapter Four: Background and early attempts at justification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The negotiation process</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Government's strategy</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifying the appointment</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A failure to seek advice</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponents move to annul appointment</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impropriety alleged</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP raises spectre of corruption</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up an inquiry</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metherell stands down</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censured by Parliament</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Five: Struggling with a situational morality: Convincing the ICAC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The inquiry process</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unravelling the detail</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impropriety and corruption denied</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Timber Industry Bill</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing submissions</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsel assisting the Commission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying section 8</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying section 9</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to Clark's submission</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A question of political advantage</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bribery rejected</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Six: The report and its political consequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Corrupt’ under the Act</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying s8 – Greiner and Moore</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying s8 – Metherell, Humphry and Hazzard</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second test – s 9</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dismissal of ministers</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to the report</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICAC criticised (and defended)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament resumes to debate findings</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court appeal begins</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bone of contention – s9(1)(c)</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner and Moore vindicated</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ICAC’s response</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner and Moore resign as MPs</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Seven: Establishing media interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering the numbers</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles per month</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring ‘interest’ by square centimetres</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News, editorials and cartoons compared</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charting coverage by day</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event driven coverage?</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement of editorials</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The timing of cartoons</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Eight: Editorial coverage analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorials analysed</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti Metherell</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A breach of promise</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls for Metherell to be dismissed</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for an inquiry</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting the call for Greiner to stand down</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal representation and costs</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the inquiry for final submissions</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting the 'corrupt conduct' finding</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner’s 'new standards' defence rejected</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resignation</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for ICAC, but calls for reform</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner lauded and criticised</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Nine: General news analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A responsible media?</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a watchdog role</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards the appointment</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metherell criticised</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner's role condemned</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government’s justifications rejected</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The inquiry process</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner’s appearance criticised</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling the conduct</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greiner’s leadership under threat</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision to appeal finding questioned</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of ICAC and calls for reform</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of the media</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms of Inquiry coverage</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Ten: Letters to the editor analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of the media</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging media influence</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive or negative reactions?</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering the issues</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of the issue</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early responses to the appointment</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards Greiner</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of Metherell</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling the conduct</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards the ICAC</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The definitional quagmire – an impossible task</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational morality rejected</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability and corruption</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A failure to manage the issue</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media as an accountability mechanism</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A responsible media?</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The letters in focus</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding remarks</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices:

Appendix A: Memorandum of Understanding 388
Appendix B: Extracts from Public Sector Management Act 390
Appendix C: Extracts from ICAC Act 391
Appendix D: Greiner’s Ministerial Code of Conduct 394
Appendix E: Letter from Tim Moore outlining EPA proposal 404
Appendix F: Potential and actual publication days compared 408
Appendix G: Total articles by newspaper/day 409
Appendix H: Sq cms per newspaper/day 410
Appendix I: Bylined journalists and their contributions 411

Selected Readings 412