

PRESS COUNCIL ADJUDICATIONS

ADJUDICATION NO. 957

The Australian Press Council finds that the Newcastle Herald's treatment of Prime Minister John Howard's holiday at the nearby Hawks Nest resort did not breach its principles.

However, the Council does not endorse the newspaper's approach and believes the coverage verged on the irresponsible and on an unnecessary invasion of privacy.

Several readers complained to the Council, and many more to the newspaper itself, about the Herald's 7 January 1998 page one "Dear John" letter to the PM in which the newspaper criticised Mr Howard for his failure to visit Newcastle immediately after BHP last year announced plans to close its main Newcastle steel mill.

The page one article announced the newspaper was delivering a letter, printed inside the paper, to the PM and invited the readers "to pay him a visit too", and was accompanied by a map of the Hawks Nest township and directions on how to find the PM.

In part, the article read: "Take a few beers and a bag of prawns, by all means. Let's be polite about it. But let's tell the Prime Minister that it just isn't good enough for him to duck for cover when we need him most and then rub salt into the wound by lounging on our doorstep when the fuss blows over."

Though there were other grounds for the numerous complaints, it was these words, together with the directions to find the PM, which inspired the most angry responses, to both the Press Council and the newspaper.

The most common criticism is that the newspaper was not giving the PM a "fair go" and was invading his privacy by urging readers to disrupt his holidays. The Council notes, however, that the PM had offered photo opportunities to the media during the stay.

One complainant said "This disgraceful piece of journalism encourages the beer swilling, prawn eating element of the community" to disrupt the PM's rest, an elitist reference the Press Council does not read into the newspaper's coverage and which the Council rejects.

The argument, put by another complainant, that the articles were offensive because they were "an incitement to citizens to take action which is likely to lead to a breach of peace or to commit criminal offences" (under the

Crimes Act) is also rejected by the Press Council.

The Newcastle Herald printed responses from Mr Howard and various public figures, including many politically opposed to him, strongly criticising the newspaper. It printed dozens of letters which vigorously attacked the newspaper. On this score, the Newcastle Herald observed its obligation to provide balance.

In the eyes of some of the complainants and some of the newspaper's readers, the coverage was tasteless, to others it was childish, nevertheless public political figures are open to scrutiny, whether on holiday or not.

ADJUDICATION NO. 958

The Press Council has dismissed a complaint concerning an article entitled "P.M.'s other lodge" published in the Sun-Herald on 28 December 1997.

Under that heading there were pictures and a story about the Prime Minister's holiday arrangements, including tongue-in-cheek remarks made by a local ALP personality that the PM might be a target for violence.

Douglas Young complained that the article was "in bad taste and offensive" and further that it amounted to "an incitement to citizens to take action which was likely to lead to a breach of the peace or to commit criminal offences".

He wrote a brief letter to the editor of the Sun-Herald in which he strongly criticised the standard of journalism. That letter was not published.

The Sun-Herald did publish other letters critical of the article in its editions of 4 and 11 January 1998 and says that Mr Young's letter was not selected.

The Australian Press Council has consistently ruled that where a number of letters express a similar view, an editor is entitled to publish a representative sample. It does so in this case.

On the issue of "bad taste", the Council recognises that opinions will often differ. In this case, viewed objectively, it finds that the article was not so repugnant as to be extremely offensive to the general readership of the newspaper.

ADJUDICATION NO. 959

The Press Council wishes again to draw attention to the need for care in reporting statistics and extreme care in trying to interpret them. "Lies, damn lies and statistics" rings all too true.

It makes these comments in upholding parts of a complaint against The Daily Telegraph, Sydney, over a 3 December 1997 report on the use of now-banned guns in murders in Australia.

The Press Council finds that the report and headlines were misleading and the newspaper made insufficient effort to correct an error when it was drawn to its attention.

The paper agrees that it confused aspects of statistics reported to the Federal Parliament by the Australian Institute of Criminology. The Institute figures are hard to interpret, and even harder to summarise, since some refer to "homicides", and some to "homicide incidents" (in which there may have been more than one homicide) and "homicide" itself is meant to include murder, manslaughter, and killings involving mental instability.

The introduction to the Telegraph story accurately stated that the statistics showed that "Nearly half the gun murders in the past seven years involved firearms now prohibited or restricted". However the statistics also show, on careful reading, that only 10 per cent of all homicides (involving all weapons, including knives, other weapons and bare hands) were caused by now-banned firearms.

The main headline: "Banned guns big killers" was thus misleading, and the secondary headline, "50pc of murder weapons now illegal" was wrong; it should have read "gun-murder weapons".

Later the story went on to say incorrectly that an Institute study had shown that "46 per cent of the more than 2200 murders committed between 1989 and 1996 involved weapons now prohibited or restricted". In fact, the total of "homicide incidents" given in the study was 2226; only 21 per cent of those involved firearms of all types; and guns now prohibited or restricted were involved in about 46 per cent of that 21 per cent.

Any reader who followed the figures given by the paper would assume that in the period about 1020 murders involved now-banned guns, whereas the real figure, according to the study's percentages, was 215 "incidents".