



Print Media Inquiry: First Impressions Mixed

The report of the Senate inquiry into foreign ownership of the print media was released as CU went to press and only the major recommendations were to hand. (More detailed analysis will appear next month.)

Two odd aspects of the majority (Liberals plus Democrat Cheryl Kernot) proposals were immediately apparent.

First, having diagnosed the trouble, the majority recommended a remedy which would retain part of the cause of it.

They found that Paul Keating 'did attempt to improperly influence the political coverage of Fairfax newspapers by holding out to Mr Black the prospect of increased investment in Fairfax in return for balanced coverage.' They also concluded that 'hasty and ill considered decisions were made which were based on political imperatives rather than the national interest.'

But their suggested reform, a new Foreign Investment Commission to replace the Foreign Investment Review Board, would leave decisions affecting key industry sectors like media to the Treasurer. True, the FIC would be more transparent and the Treasurer would have to disclose his or her reasons for decision. But if the recent inquiry proved anything it showed that to repose sensitive decisions on foreign investment in the media solely in the hands of a Minister is to encourage decisions based on political imperatives and not the national interest.

The majority does not seem to have taken its reform plan far enough. Interestingly, the Labor minority also proposed structural changes and greater openness and consultation, despite their bitter rejection of the majority's findings against Keating, Treasurer Ralph Willis and a former Treasurer, John Kerin.

The second oddity is that the majority blithely suggests that legally enforceable guarantees of editorial independence be examined as a possible response to attempts by politicians to put pressure on media proprietors and executives. That cure would almost certainly kill the patient.

enlist the help of media proprietors and management. Only editors and journalists can guarantee editorial independence. The best way Governments can assist them is to ensure that concentrated media power is diluted and there is a range of alternative employers for those who stand up to proprietorial or management pressure and lose. □



Sick of Ingrates

A memo about use of office Cabcharge dockets, addressed to all staff of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph Mirror* by editor-in-chief John Hartigan, has fallen from a passing taxi.

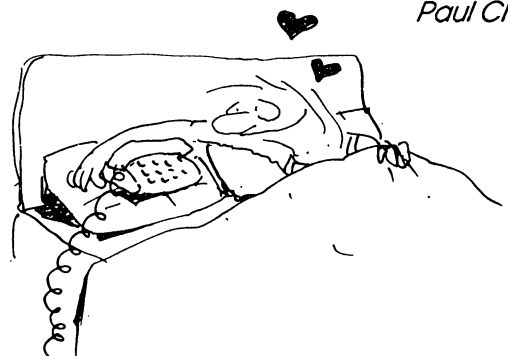
Having noted that most staff were familiar with the rules, the memo says that sometimes people need reminding. And when they are reminded, Hartigan writes, there is normally 'much huffing and puffing about the rights of taking a taxi on assignment to the city etc.'

He says that in the interests of 'a greater understanding of the problem I reproduce this recent Cabcharge docket (for a \$44 fare).

In the docket's 'trip explanation' section appears the following handwritten note: 'Passanger was drunk and sick in cab - waiting time and cost of cleaning - docket had to be wiped and dried.'

Hartigan continues: 'The passenger's signature has been excluded for reasons of decency; decency which obviously wasn't recognised when the docket was used by the staff member. Cab dockets are issued on trust. If that trust dies the system is in tatters.' □

Paul Chadwick



PHONE SEX

Pollies' Self-Interest

As this very inquiry showed, politicians are the people least likely to guarantee editorial independence. On media issues, they have a drunkard's sense of balance. Understandably, their aim is to try to gain an advantage from the media to the detriment of their opponents. Of course the system should not provide a Government with built-in levers with which to prise advantage, as does the current closed scheme of foreign investment decision-making.

But in the final analysis politicians will, like Lloyd George, try to 'square or squash' the media. They may