



Eight Weeks is a Long Time in Politics.

Some eight weeks and approximately three times round the world – or 116,000 kilometres – later the weary staff of the Canberra bureau came back to earth after the longest election campaign in memory.

Our gallant band of correspondents – Bruce Jones, Peter Logue, Mike Lawson, Craig Skehan, Patrick Lyons and Tim Dobbyn – reckoned they needed a refresher course in walking after shuttling round on planes and in mini-buses for so long.

Until the last week, it was probably also one of the most boring campaigns on record. One indication of the level of tedium – both the Hawke and Peacock planes carried Trivial Pursuit games to while away the time.

But the adage that Australian politics is never very dull for very long held true and the story came to life with a vengeance on December 1-2 after one of the most exciting polling nights for years.

AAP copy scored spectacularly throughout the campaign, with blanket cover of the party leaders, and was laced with good old-fashioned scoops and some shrewd observations.

Peter Logue livened up the last week of the campaign with his story about National Times Editor Brian Toohey's phone being tapped and the embarrassing interception of a conversation with Senator Peter Walsh. The story had a major impact in the Hawke-Peacock debate, winning AAP several credit mentions on national television.

Craig Skehan's story on Ian Sinclair's comments, linking the AIDS outbreak with ALP policies, sparked a controversial side issue that ran for several days.

Bruce Jones was the first to recognise the third prong of Prime Minister Bob Hawke's now infamous trilogy of economic

promises – to keep increases in Government spending below economic growth – and indeed it was in answer to a Jones question that Mr Hawke first coined the word "trilogy." He was also the first to write that Andrew Peacock would safely survive as opposition leader after the campaign.

Travelling journalists would not have minded the long hours and arduous travelling so much if there had been more meaty stories at the end of it all.

But with commendable devotion to duty, they did not miss one flight, unlike some of their colleagues – notably one who, tired and emotional, had the compensation of sitting bleary-eyed next to Tina Turner on a commercial flight from Adelaide while trying to catch up with the Hawke entourage.

Not the Electoral News...

A telescoped impact such as this, combining events of October and November, makes it impossible to list in detail all the other splendid achievements of the last few months. But the highlights include:

CANBERRA – Tony Hills' extended coverage of the second Senate committee inquiry into the affairs of Mr Justice Murphy, Peter Logue predicting well in advance the December 1 poll date, and coming up a day early with the findings of the Murphy inquiry, and the best bright, Patrick Lyons' story on Rod Marsh suggesting the Australian cricketers should crack a few Windies heads.

Not to be outdone by their Canberra confreres, LONDON staff also spent long hours travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles, tracking down stories that

filled front and back pages of Australian newspapers.

Mark Lever commuted to Ireland covering the arrest of "Aussie" Bob Trimbole and the ensuing legal battle which earned him scores of bylines and half a dozen frontpage leads.

At the same time Howard Northey enjoyed the rare thrill of backing a winner as he reported the Wallaby victories over England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland and the Barbarians. Howard even had the distinction of bylined rugby stories in The Age and Melbourne Herald.

Separate visits to Wales and Scotland by Jane Eyre produced widely-used features on the coal miners strike and preparations for the 1986 Commonwealth Games.

Her byline was also popular on Brighton bombing stories, especially the exclusive interview with Australia's High Commissioner.

WELLINGTON correspondent John Coomber planned a quiet holiday in Vanuatu after covering the petit revolution in New Caledonia, but was laid low by a fish.

He spent most of his hard-earned break recovering from ciguatera poisoning, a condition frequently fatal to lesser mortals.

Brushing the Grim Reaper aside, John appeared much more upset at finding himself off base when the Nationals dumped former P.M. Muldoon and he missed the chance to settle a couple of old scores.

Chris Pash followed up a hair-raising series on rape, robbery and retribution in Papua New Guinea by accepting a transfer to Adelaide. He replaces bureau chief Don Woolford who was lured east to become Sydney Bureau Editor.

Another correspondent on the move was PERTH's Diana Plater who scored big play with features on golden handshakes for workers on Christmas Island, cattlemen fighting for survival in the Kimberleys and the growing empire of the

Lord of Broome.

SYDNEY – The reporting scene was dominated by long-running court hearings and inquiries.

They included Sandra Harvey at the Bikies case at Penrith – a marathon effort because of the journey there and back as much as for the difficulties of reporting with 42 defendants – Les Kennedy and others at the Fine Cotton inquiry, Debra Bull at the Rex Jackson committal hearing and several people at the Ananda Marga inquiry.

Sydney's other stories to win wide play included Les Kennedy's series of exclusives on the tapping of phones at the Phillip Street Legal Chambers, James McCullough's file on Kerry Packer's detailed response to the Costigan report allegations and the death of Paul Landa.

In sport, cricket dominated the headlines with Ross Mullins' name clearly heading the byline lists.

MELBOURNE bureau newcomer Sally Dusting showed a little old fashioned reporter's initiative when she and cadet Siobhan Harrington faced the tough task of reporting colour from this year's Melbourne Cup, with a radio deadline pressing. Sally, on only her second day with AAP, talked Melbourne society figure Captain Peter Janson into letting her use the telephone in his Range Rover doing chicken and champagne duty at the legendary Flemington Members' car park party.

What he didn't tell her was she'd have to phone through her story while fending off his doberman dog bent on defending his master's vehicle.

However, Captain Janson, invariably described in the social pages as dashing or charming, made sure Sally recovered with the aid of a glass or several of Moet and Chandon.

Meanwhile back at the track, national racing editor David Eskill joined the Melbourne racing duo of Mike Hedge and Mark Ryan in laying down a most professional cover of the great race.

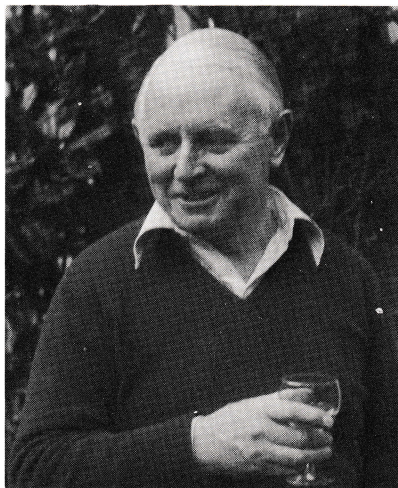
Be Sure Your Sin Will Find You Out.

And you had your doubts

about Telecom! More than two years after the event, AAP received the telex bill from the Pakistan Telegraph and Telephone Department for Ross Mullins' coverage of the Australian Cricket Tour in 1982 – all of it meticulously hand-written in pencil on a sheaf of foolscap sheets.

A Word from the Wise.

"Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted." Old AAP hands will immediately recognise the words of Bruce Hewitt, who retired from the company in October after an association with AAP which far exceeded his 14 years on the staff.



Bruce Hewitt

He first learned the value of the old warriors' maxim during his years as a soldier and war correspondent in North Africa and Europe in the Second World War, and later when he reported the rebirth of the Japanese nation under the American occupation from 1945.

Since then the message has been passed on to Hewitt proteges from AAP bureaus in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and London, where dozens of young journalists learned from him the eternal value of preparation, backgrounding and cultivation of sources.

The policy reaped dividends as AAP began producing more of its own copy during the mid-1970's and just to remind them what he was on about, Hewitt gave his contemporaries a lesson in reporting during the African boycott of the Montreal Olympic Games. While the rest of

the world's press drew a blank Hewitt used his matchless contacts to breach the security screen around the International Olympic Committee and find out what was really going on.

New Zealand-born Hewitt first worked alongside former Editor Lyall Rowe and other AAP staffers during the 1950 Commonwealth (then Empire) Games in Auckland, and continued the Games association until the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

He is still grateful for the stories the Games provided for him – the Landy-Bannister mile at Vancouver in 1954, the unparalleled 800m-1500 double of compatriot Peter Snell at Tokyo in 1964, and for an old All Black Rugby reporter the unforgettable spectacle of New Zealand beating Australia to win the Olympic hockey gold medal in Montreal. His coverage of the 1966 Kingston Games for New Zealand newspapers won him the Baird Sportswriter of the Year Award.

Hewitt first came to the AAP newsroom in 1956 to take charge of the file to NZPA and to cover the Melbourne Olympics, with diversions to the Woomera rocket range and the now controversial Maralinga H-bomb tests.

His 12-month assignment stretched to eight years before he returned to Wellington as news editor of NZPA.

He joined AAP in 1970, survived the dramas of the 1971 Springbok tour, and went on to "desk" many of the big political stories of the time, like the Khemlani loans crisis in Canberra.

It is no coincidence that while Hewitt was in charge correspondents in bureaus like Canberra and London produced some of their best copy.

Just about everyone at AAP has learned something valuable from "Spruce", who combines an agency-trained respect for the facts with a relaxed and whimsical writing style which his colleagues hope will produce a book or two in retirement.

True to his maxim, Hewitt is not about to waste his 47-year reconnaissance of journalism. He took over the training course for AAP cadets this year to pass on the benefits of his experience. No prizes for guessing what the first lesson was.