

A Toast to Fifty Not Out.

It was, as this profession is so fond of saying, unprecedented. And, no doubt, long overdue.

Fifty years of AAP service to the nation's news media was marked in May by a two-day editorial conference, a wholly appropriate and not altogether surprising form of celebration in the circumstances.

Yet "Edcon '85" was nonetheless the catalyst for a unique event. For never before had Australia's major media figures gathered under one roof to take an introspective and analytical look at the news industry.

And they did it with gusto, more than 120 of Australia's daily newspaper Editors in Chief and Editors and metropolitan radio and television News Directors.

Also there were the "Big Three" International agencies, Reuter, The AP and AFP, the Press Associations of Britain and



Federal Opposition leader Andrew Peacock stepped into the lions' den to explain how the news media got it all wrong at the last Federal Election by forecasting a government landslide.

New Zealand and their counterparts in Japan (Kyodo), Indonesia (Antara) and Malaysia (Bernama).

Thus indirectly represented were those who read newspapers, watch TV or listen to radio in virtually all of the western world, much of the east and large chunks of the third.

How do you describe such an incestuous gathering? What is the collective noun for editors? Prime Minister Bob Hawke canvassed the point in a speech to the AAP Anniversary dinner, recalling that the same question arose at a meeting of vice-chancellors in Colombo.

On that occasion, the PM said, the collective noun applied by the resident wit was a "Lack of Principals".

Mulligan's Chew.

The editors rolled their sleeves at least partway up to confront some of the great matters of moment, trying for substance as well as style.

But if this conference goes the way of all others, it will be remembered 10 years hence for the one-liners of Hugh Mulligan.

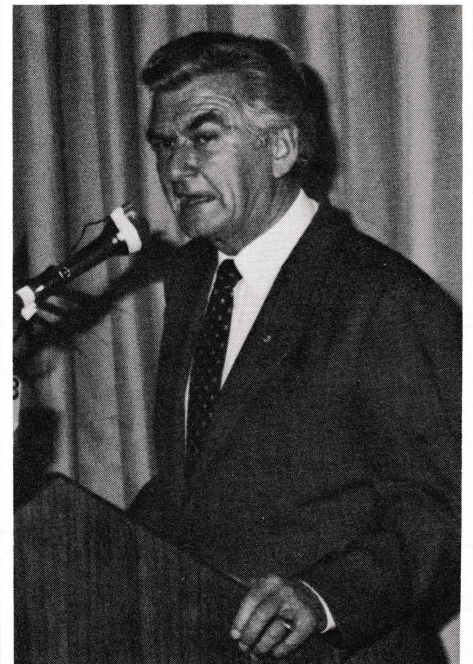
This pear-shaped, silver-haired sage with a toothbrush moustache is everything a foreign correspondent should be without managing to look or sound like one.

He delighted all with a procession of anecdotes and pet headlines, and might still be chewing the fat if his audience had its way and made him continue.

The 60-year-old special correspondent, nowadays virtually a roving ambassador for the Associated Press, had as good an excuse as any for levity and let Erica Jong's poetry say it for him: "There's enough sorrow to sustain us, it's joy that's in short supply."

One gem was his rundown of the guest list for the Charles-Diana Wedding, which he said included Kings, Princes, Governors-general, Ambassadors, "six former girlfriends of Charles, four former boyfriends of Diana and three members of the House of Lords who could have gone either way".

Another was his reference to the Gettysburg address which fortunately never reached the hand of an over-zealous sub. If it did one of the most-quoted intros in history — "Four score and seven years ago . . ." — would be bound to have been screwed up and rewritten to: "Eighty-seven years ago . . ."



Maximus Editorius. Few Prime Ministers can expect such media attention as Bob Hawke commanded in addressing AAP's 50th Anniversary dinner.

Immaculate Deception.

Mulligan's collection of headlines, some of which he produced from a coat pocket to prove their authenticity, ranged from the delightfully simple "Escaped Leopard believed spotted" to this incongruous offering on the winning streak of a US collegiate sports team: "Virgin Mary unscored on for fourth straight week".

People in the business of communicating to others, though, are not necessarily the best at communicating with, or for, themselves, a point made by AAP Editor in Chief Barry Wheeler.

Noting the lack of an Australian equivalent of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the British Guild of Editors, or any such common voice, he observed that "the doctors, lawyers and accountants have a 10-length start on us".

There were harsh words from within: A chief editorial executive who described his cadet training scheme as "fair" at best, a product of his system who agreed with him, an afternoon newspaper editor who described 19 out of 20 of his editions as



Gathering of the clan. Editor in Chief, Barry Wheeler welcomes members of the AAP family to Edcon '85, a first for the company.

"non-newspapers", another who said he "had to" introduce a bingo game because the opposition did it.

There were also plenty of harsh words from without.

The wonderfully theatrical Professor Henry Mayer scolded the media chiefs for failing to understand social changes, or even bothering to mix with ordinary people, whom he said they despised. This was costing them dearly in market support.

"Your vomiting is very expensive," said the bearded professor, "so go on vomiting, as long as you realise that you are paying a lot of money for it."

And Violently Flows the Don.

Wallaby coach Alan Jones poured scorn on the self-appointed sporting experts who think the right to write confers on them the automatic status of authorities.

He appealed for more sophistication, saying everyone was the poorer for reports that are no more than "walking notice boards of the scores and details. If you are interested you'll already know the score and if you aren't you won't want to read it."

He cited a phrase of yesteryear, that "poetry and murder lived together" in Don Bradman, as the sort of eloquence sports writers should strive for.

He also bucketed the alarming extent to which newspapers work sports stars and ghost writers in tandem, "buying a name, then getting some other incompetent to give it some sense of credence".

Turning the lectern into a pulpit at times, Jones said nothing was so undervalued in Australia as excellence, and described negative criticism as a "corrosive aspect of national life".

South Australian Ombudsman Mary Beasley said racism and sexism were still rife in the media but discrimination was a fact of life, like the common cold, blow flies and parking fines.

No legislation could stop people, she said, discriminating "in their own peculiar way for their own peculiar reasons".

Showing a turn of phrase that members of her audience would do well to reflect, if not relect upon, she said truth was "not the square root of two balanced quotes".

Reporters, like others, had their own biases and personal beliefs, choosing in many cases to highlight "cosmetic one-liners" from an hour long interview, and picking news angles on some nebulous concept of "news sense".

Manual Control.

Evening newspaper editors seemed to show a preoccupation with what people do with their hands.

Brisbane's Doug Flaherty spoke of the difficulty in reaching evening paper readers in the sunshine state because of extra leisure and the tyranny of time.

"They have a mango in one hand," he said, "and a Moreton Bay bug in the other."

Sydney's Ron Ford said his paper tried to complement TV rather than compete with it, adding that the grand plan was for his readers to have "the channel changer in one hand and the Sun in the other".

Harry Gordon, author and Editor in Chief of the Herald and Weekly Times, examined the higher reaches of journalism as an art form and came up with our own home-grown Tom Keneally.

"He's not a leprechaun with a goatee beard," said Gordon.

"Quintessentially, he represents the meeting point between journalism and literature."

Journalism was unreadable and literature unread, according to Oscar Wilde, but at least journalism could aspire to be "literature in a hurry".

The Thomas Keneallys of the world represented the way to survival for newspapers because of the "enduring nature of print on paper" and the inherent advantage of being able to use special words that TV and radio cannot.

Gordon cited Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, William Howard Russell, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway and Banjo Patterson — all great authors, all great journalists, all great reporters of history.

Punchlines.

Raising the familiar cry for quality writing, he recalled a great Red Smith line about a tame title fight involving Jersey Joe Walcott in which scarcely a punch was thrown in anger by the over-cautious combatants: "At one point controversy got so heated they almost came to blows."

AP President Louis Boccardi urged newspapers to be more willing to correct their errors openly, to explain their decisions and actions and to strive to reflect the world their readers knew.

This was vital to the media's credibility, an issue also touched on by Max Suich, Chief Editorial Executive of John Fairfax and Sons.

Dealing with journalists' training, Suich said his organisation's credibility was affected sometimes by the lack of historical perspective of journalists in their early 20's writing about events which their older readers had lived through first hand.

One of the most important aims of a cadetship, he concluded, was to break the almost irresistible tendency of young journalists to "nag, lecture and bore".



Associated Press President Louis D. Boccardi opened the conference with a tribute to AAP — "... internationally recognised as one of the most imaginative, rapidly growing and dynamic news agencies in the world."

The editors themselves had to withstand a minimum of nagging, lecturing and boredom.

At the end, none could justly claim to echo the sentiments in Beasley's story of Mae West. Asked what she thought of a Jean-Paul Sartre play, she replied: "Honey, I didn't even understand the intermission."

Living Through the Tax Yawn.

The drone of the July tax summit left most participants with a pain in the anatomy. In fact, some wag said it was easier to sleep with the headphones on (amplifying the speaker) than with them off.

Although each day was meant to be devoted to a particular topic, it became clear that delegates were interested only in endlessly pushing their own barrow.

For Canberra Bureau staffers, the experience was somewhat akin to battery-hen journalism, lining up for a never-ending rotating roster of speech reporting.

Luckily, the eggs they laid were lapped up by the newspapers, with "The Australian" giving AAP stories a particularly extensive run.

Only the two interstaters — Bruce Hextall, Sydney's Deputy Finance Editor (news), and Chris Falvey, Melbourne's new Industrial Roundsman — had the luxury of viewing the talkfest from the wings.

Bruce chased the business delegates around the corridors of Parliament House, while Chris spent long, fruitful hours drinking with unionists at Canberra's International Hotel (where the famous hotel-room deal was struck between Prime Minister Bob Hawke and ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty).

The visitors' intelligence network kept AAP well ahead of the mill and was of great assistance to Bureau Chief Bruce Jones and Economics Writer Mike Lawson in compiling remarkably well-informed nightleads.

Not to be outshone, on the final Thursday Deputy Bureau Chief Peter Logue obtained full details of the new tax deal, beating Prime Minister Bob Hawke's announcement at the final session by several hours.



A lighter moment for members of the panel discussion on the future of evening newspapers. From left to right: Harry Gordon, Editor in Chief of the Herald & Weekly Times, Brisbane Telegraph Editor, Doug Flaherty, Sydney Sun Editor in Chief, Ron Ford and Adelaide News Editor, Roger Holden.

Lang Ties the Knot.

Sydney Industrial Roundman Geoff Spencer scored one of the society page scoops of the year when he was the only journalist invited to Lang Hancock's wedding recently.

The wedding, right up until the day, was also one of the year's best kept secrets.

The bride, the former Miss Ross Lacson of Manila, told Geoff a few days before to turn up at a well-to-do address in the Sydney suburb of Killara because a "deal was going to be signed".

However, it wasn't until Geoff walked through the door and saw the dark suits and carnations, that he realised the true nature of the contract.

Only a handful of people attended — most of whom were long time employees or associates of the Hancock Empire.

Geoff first met Mr Hancock by chance in a hotel in the Persian Gulf State of Bahrain in 1983 when he was a reporter for a local English-language newspaper.

"I remember seeing this guy with a walking stick and thick glasses sitting in the foyer," Geoff recalls.

"I went up to him, introduced myself and wrote a story on how he wanted to sell iron ore to the Arabs."

That sort of initiative obviously impressed Hancock. Earlier this year, he organised for Geoff to be flown by Lear Jet to inspect the beginnings of a new mining project called "Marrandoo" in the Pilbara which Mr Hancock hopes to develop with help from Communist Romania.

Les Pate's Fight for Life.

The Brisbane Bureau followed closely the tragic fight for life by heart-lung patient Les Pates, who won a federal government grant for a transplant operation in America after a wrangle over whether his condition resulted

from his navy service.

AAP's John Sheed was the first reporter to inform the Pates family that the government had approved the long-fought for grant, and he was surprised by the reaction.

"I rang the Pates home at Upper Mount Gravatt in Brisbane about 6.30 am on June 14th, after we received a telex from Lionel Bowen's office advising the federal government had approved the grant for the US trip," John said.

"I was surprised by the reaction from the family as I assumed they would have been the first to be told.

"I spoke to Les after his brother answered the phone. Both men understandably found it hard to believe me."

John, who had taken the precaution of checking that the press release was genuine before phoning the Pates, described the reaction in his story:

Warren Pates said he was sleeping by the phone when AAP rang this morning with the news about the government decision.

"I was still half asleep but Les was up and he came into the room and asked who was on the phone," Mr Pates said.

"All I could say was, "It's someone from Australian Associated Press saying your trip has been approved".

AAP broke the story to the nation, and on the strength of our call, Les Pates booked himself back into hospital straight away to prepare for his trip to America.

Les left Brisbane on June 29 for the Pittsburgh Presbyterian Hospital where he spent two weeks waiting for the transplant.

The Brisbane Bureau checked the hospital twice a day until he had the operation on July 14th.

Andrea Downes rang the hospital for the routine check on that day and suspicions were aroused that something was happening when for the first time the hospital refused to release anything, even his condition.

Next morning it fell to John Sheed to confirm the death with the hospital and he also spoke to Pate's mother, who, incidentally, remembered that it was AAP which had given the news of the grant.

Politics PNG Style

Port Moresby correspondent Craig Skehan is finding Papua New Guinea politics quite a contrast after his five years in the Canberra Bureau.

He says the similarities with Australian politics seem to end with the parliamentary formalities. "While the speaker wears the traditional wig of the Westminster system, he also plays in a Rock 'n Roll Band when not on the job."

Traditional tribal feuds, customs and superstitions play a large part in PNG politics. Craig encapsulated the unique flavour which results when he reported how Prime Minister Michael Somare, with a glass of champagne in hand, announced the expulsion of his Deputy Paias Wingti from the ruling Pangu Pati.

The story was bylined in the Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald, among others.

A feature of PNG life is tribal fighting, which is reported there like the road toll is in Australia.

Craig says this takes a bit of getting used to.

However, he is being assisted in his acclimatisation by the bureau's resident canine, Sam. "A loyal and energetic companion — but I am having difficulty training him to answer the phone and do the office accounts."

Canuspeak Cablese.

Cablese is no longer the journalist's second language thanks to modern communications, but former AAP staffer Chris Kremmer found there are still times when it helps to know the vocabulary.

While on an overseas holiday, Chris filed a freelance piece to us after a visit to the Australian contingent in the U.N. Sinai peace-keeping force.

It was followed by this message in vintage cablese:

DIDUGET SINAIYARN
WIREREPLY URGENT
C/LEONE OZEMBASSY CAIRO.
KREMMER.