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## **‘Reporting from the ‘zoo plane’, West Maitland’: An initial exploration into journalistic ‘eyewitnessing’ of Australia’s first federal election**

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### **Abstract**

As noted political historian Marianne Simms (2001a) points out, seemingly more momentous events overshadow Australia’s first election campaign. Historians have traditionally been more focused on the inauguration of the Commonwealth and the swearing in of the ‘interim’ ministry in Sydney in January and the formal opening of the first parliament in Melbourne in May to the extent that the January 17-29 March campaign has been labeled the ‘forgotten’ election (Simms, 2001a). Using articles covering the 1901 policy speeches of Edmund Barton and George Reid, as well as biographical and autobiographical material, this paper seeks to fill this historical gap by examining the coverage of Australia’s first election campaign and by analysing signs and indications that political journalists engaged in the long and well-established professional practice of ‘eyewitnessing’ (Zelizer, 2007) during their coverage of the campaign.

### **Introduction**

This paper is wholly exploratory. It scrounges together what meagre evidence there exists of the professional journalistic practice of ‘eyewitnessing’ Australia’s first federal election. For the purposes of this study, ‘eyewitnessing’ is conceptualised in the Zelizer tradition (2007). In other words, ‘eyewitnessing’ is understood as the heart of journalistic ideology and practice, and functions as central to journalism’s reportage, role and technology (Zelizer, 2007: 409).

Important to the facilitation of the modern political journalist as ‘eyewitness’, is the ‘zoo plane’, a wholly modern American concept, founded by a wholly modern American (Thompson, 1971). In possibly more obvious terms, US author Timothy Crouse described in his 1973 publication, *The Boys on the Bus*, how journalists on the campaign trail operated as a ‘pack’, coining the phrase ‘pack journalism’, a term now used to describe any crowd of journalists chasing the same story.

In an Australian context, the ‘zoo plane’, as a theoretical political concept, was furthered by Mungo MacCallum (1979), in his memoir of the same name and later by Margo Kingston (1999), in *Off the Rails* and by Margaret Simons (1999) in *Fit to Print*. From here, the ‘zoo plane’ has evolved to conceptualise the entourage of journalists who follow political candidates on campaign trails. The practice has been accused of causing biased political reportage (Parker, 1990), but this study is more interested in the possible resulting cooperation between otherwise natural journalistic competitors (Kingston, 1999). As Rodney Tiffen (1989) suggests in *News and Power*, ‘[h]erd journalism produces conformity between competing organisations’, apparently to the ‘detriment’

of 'genuine scoops' (1989: 131). Although Tiffen uses the phrase 'herd journalism', its conceptual similarities to 'pack journalism' (Crouse, 1972) are clear. Each phenomenon can be indicated by similarities in reportage between completely separate news outlets. It is signs of this occurrence that may indicate whether a 'Zoo plane' facilitated journalistic 'eyewitnessing' of the 1901 Australian federal election campaign.

We know almost too well, the big name political reporters on the 'Zoo planes' of last year's Australian Federal election campaign. Sky News' Tom Connell, News Limited's Katherine Murphy, and who can forget Channel 10's John Hill making Liberal Party candidate, Jaymes Diaz, squirm when quizzed about the Coalition's six-point plan to 'stop the boats'? It was these, and others, who epitomised journalism's professional practice of 'eyewitnessing' in bringing us the 2013 election campaign.

Even in the pre-digital era, heavy-hitters such as Michelle Grattan, Laurie Oakes, Paul Kelly, Glenn Milne – those who Margaret Simons would describe as 'the God correspondents' (1999: 23) – emphasised their role as 'eyewitnesses' through their images on television, their faces next to bylines, and even the occasional biographic feature profile. In other words, the journalist as 'eyewitness' to modern election campaigns is almost impossible to ignore.

But in the first federal election campaign, reporters had no such devices to document their professional practice and ideology as 'eyewitnesses', and there is very little evidence that anything like a 'zoo plane' existed at all. This may be partially why, while we know possibly every high-profile modern political journalist by name, we have very little idea about the personalities who arranged the political 'smorgasbord' from which voters chose during Australia's first election campaign. This paper makes an initial start in the study of the journalists, and their professional practices, in covering what Marianne Simms (2001a) describes as the 'forgotten election'. It explores newspaper articles written at the time from randomly selected metropolitan news outlets. Each state that participated in the election is represented in the sample. These include:

- *The Argus* (Victoria)
- *The Sydney Morning Herald* (New South Wales)
- *The Brisbane Courier* (Queensland)
- *The Advertiser* (South Australia)
- *The Mercury* (Tasmania)

To contain the study, this paper focuses on the 1901 coverage of what political scientist Sally Young (2003) says has since come to 'signal' the 'formal' start of election campaigns: the policy speech. By examining the newspaper articles covering Australia's first official policy speech made by Edmond Barton, and the first Opposition policy speech unofficially made by George Reid, this paper explores signs of 'eyewitnessing' as a journalistic practice, and indications of 'zoo plane' formation. Where relevant, this paper references biographical and autobiographical material about the Australian journalists who may have functioned as 'eyewitnesses' to these events.

## **Background**

We would like to think that every Australian child above the age of about eight knows that the first Prime Minister of Australia, Edmund Barton, contested the 1901 federal election as head of a caretaker government. The parties contesting the election were Barton's Protectionist Party, and the Free Trade Party, unofficially led by the former NSW Premier, George Reid.

Election issues included the construction of a transcontinental railway, universal suffrage and old-age pensions. The two parties were bipartisan on the White Australia Policy, involvement in the Transvaal and the monarchy (although the Protectionists later modified their policy on a White Australia after Queensland pointed out it needed to import a Kanaka workforce for its sugar plantations). By far the biggest issue of the campaign, as the names of the political parties suggest, was what was known as 'fiscal faith', revolving around questions that asked how to build an economically independent new nation based on either free trade or protection.

The physical demands of campaigning were fierce. As political scientist, Dean Jaensch (2001) points out, travel was 'inescapable' because it was the 'only way to canvass'. The Free Trade Party leader, and self-proclaimed 'leader of the Opposition', George Reid, travelled to all states except WA, gave major addresses at 40 meetings, travelled by train and steamer and a buggy drawn by two horses, and spoke at every possible place through which he passed (Jaensch, 2001). According to Simms (2002: 160), there existed an 'across the board' affection for Reid and his 'one-man-band' activities, partially because he was seen as the underdog (although partially because he didn't own a car!).

This election was significant because it was the first of only two times that an appointed government, as opposed to one elected by the people, conducted an Australian election campaign. Tiffen (1989) says that in

more modern campaigns, journalists see incumbents as more 'inherently more newsworthy' than oppositions because they enact decisions, and oppositions are often reduced to a role of 'carping irrelevance' (1989: 129). Even so, as Simms (2001b) points out, the press in 1901 provided a 'somewhat' counter-force to the Government's incumbency advantage. *The Argus* was a free-trade paper, *The Daily Telegraph* was 'determinedly' free trade, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) was 'somewhat' free trade. *The Age*, says Simms, was 'a law unto itself'. Run by patriarch David Syme, *The Age's* idea of what constituted a good candidate was often different from the views of the Protectionist Party, whose cause the paper was allegedly espousing.

With respect therefore to this election, we have information about the news-outlets and their political leanings, and the personalities of the candidates. We also know that, although no party won a majority, Barton was able to form government with the support of the Australian Labor Party. And yet, of individual journalists on the hypothetical 1901 'herd', 'pack' or 'zoo plane', we know very little. Almost nothing has been recorded of their experiences following campaigners, telegraphing the points of speeches, how they interacted with politicians, whether there was such a thing as 'question-time' or press conferences, the pressures of deadlines and so on. Of the intricacies of professional practice that contributed to the evolution of Australian journalism's 'eyewitness' ideology, we know next to nothing.

Despite the lack of historical inquiry into the individual journalists who covered the 1901 election campaign, we do know they were 'on the ground' specifically covering the election? Simms (2002: 159) describes candidates giving addresses at various locations, and that many kept up heavy schedules of daily meetings, mostly held in the evenings, almost all of which were reported in the local and metropolitan press. Sally Young (2003) points out that newspapers were the only mass media available and that there were 21 daily newspapers, owned by 17 different independent proprietors, and that political content was high. She says:

“ The press contained pages of reports of public meetings held over the new nation, from big gatherings in the cities to the parish pump meetings in the small towns and outback (Young, 2003: 4). ”

And yet, despite these 'pages' of political content during the election campaign, newspapers themselves appear reluctant to document the experiences of the people employed to 'eyewitness' Australia's first election campaign, unlike today when it's hard to avoid the bylines and headshots of journalists in papers and online, the various broadcast news services using their reporters as tools of promotion, and journalists themselves publishing autobiographical material. What this means is that historians of the future will have no lack of material to investigate more modern journalistic practices, while historians interested in the coverage of the 1901 election campaign have a paucity of information.

There is however, no lack of focus on seemingly more momentous events such as the inauguration of the Commonwealth and the swearing in of the 'interim' ministry in Sydney in January and the formal opening of the first parliament in Melbourne in May. For example, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* (1931) official history is effusive about its coverage of Federation:

“ Thus, then, after a struggle lasting nearly half a century, was the great consummation achieved ... On the 1st of January, 1901 – the first day of the twentieth century – the Commonwealth was inaugurated by a series of celebrations in Sydney which, for enthusiasm and sheer magnificence of spectacle, have never been approached, before or since, within the borders of this continent ... The leading article referred fittingly to the magnificent spectacles and rejoicings of the preceding day; and congratulated both the responsible authorities and the general public on the enthusiasm and organisation displayed (1931: 392-93). ”

The official history even goes as far as mentioning the professional practices of its reporters in covering the Commonwealth's inauguration:

“ The journalists, both local and visiting, had been faced with the strenuous task during the inaugural festivities in Sydney; and had come through it with admitted honours. The final ceremony of the week was a banquet, held in special honour of the pressmen, and the Premier of New South Wales, in his capacity as chairman, made eulogistic comment on their activities (1931: 395). ”

And yet the *SMH's* official recording of how it covered the election campaign – the individual journalists involved, their professional practice, the challenges they may have faced – is invisible. The tome moves straight on to the newspaper's coverage of Queen Victoria's death and the advent of the motor car.

Even *SMH* biographer, Gavan Souter (1981), appears more concerned with Federation and the opening of Parliament than the campaign that happened in between. Although he does mention that well-remembered journalist, Henry Gullett, was acting editor at the time, there is no mention of the journalists who may have been on the 'zoo plane'.

### The West Maitland Speech

Quite why Souter (1981), and even the *SMH* (1931) itself, decided to omit the West Maitland speech and other historical 'firsts' related to the campaign in its official history, we can only speculate. But we do know that *SMH* journalists were 'eyewitnessing' the event because the pages from January 18, 1901 tell us so. The *SMH* coverage of Barton's election speech at the West Maitland Town Hall clearly shows at least one of its journalists (or 'Our Special Reporter') was present. In covering the speech, the *SMH* describes a town hall 'crowded to the doors', and the 'Right Honourable E Barton, Q.C.', being 'greeted' with 'enthusiastic cheers' as he rose to speak (*SMH* January 18, 1901: 7-8).

*The Sydney Morning Herald's* rhetoric certainly suggests 'eyewitness' reportage. This, however, becomes questionable when comparing the *SMH* coverage with that of *The Argus*, who also describes the West Maitland Town Hall as being 'crowded to the doors' and tells its readers that Mr. Barton, 'upon rising to speak', was 'greeted' with remarkably similar 'enthusiastic cheers' (*The Argus*, January 18, 1901: 5). The sentence structure and mode of address in *The Argus's* coverage is indeed similar to that of the *SMH*, so much so in fact, that it could be accused of being penned by the same author.

In the modern context, we might argue the coverage had originated from information provided in media releases or by 'spin doctors' – lazily and somewhat clumsily republished as 'eyewitness' reportage. However, if we are to believe high-profile and well-reputed journalist of the time, George Cockerill (1920), the policy speech coverage in *The Argus* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* would have been 'eyewitnessed' by two completely separate people. According to Cockerill, one W.R. Pratt covered Maitland for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, while political correspondent, David Maling wrote election coverage for *The Argus* (1920: 103-104). Cockerill's largely autobiographical publication, *Scribblers and Statesmen* (1920), further suggests that these correspondents would have worked closely together.

The fact that the *SMH* and *Argus* correspondents were likely to have been familiar with each other, would explain the rhetorical similarities between the two publications' coverage of Barton's West Maitland speech, thus reducing suspicions that this coverage was written by the same pen. This interpretation is made more credible as *The Argus's* report added the colour of an 'eyewitness' account of Sydney town, with particular interest in the 'placards' announcing that 'ladies' would not be admitted to the town hall: 'Consequently', reports *The Argus*, 'they [ladies] were absent' (January 18, 1901: 5).

So, it is quite reasonable to speculate that *Argus* and *SMH* journalists – presumably in this instance Mr. Maling writing for the former, and Mr. Pratt writing for the latter – were working together at the time, closely enough for each one to interpret events similarly to the other, but also maintaining enough distance to provide their respective audiences with details of unique interest. In other words, somewhat of a 'zoo plane' effect may have been emerging at the time.

This is further reinforced when looking at *The Advertiser's* of Barton's 1901 policy speech. Here *The Advertiser's* 'eyewitness' (or 'Our Special Correspondent') reports a 'fine speech', and that Mr. Barton received a 'cordial' reception. We can hear journalistic presence in his reportage, (and we know it was a 'he' reporter, because, as *The Argus* told us, 'she' – reporter or otherwise – was banned from the town hall), that Mr. Barton arrived at West Maitland by train at 2.15. Readers are told that a 'small crowd' assembled at Newcastle station to receive the federal ministry:

“ When the train drew into the West Maitland station there was a large concourse of people present, and Mr. Barton and his three colleagues were greeted with cheers (January 18, 1901: 5). ”

*The Advertiser's* colour and detail emphasises the role of the 'Special Correspondent' as 'eyewitness' to the Prime Minister and his entourage being 'driven' to the town hall, 'the streets through which the drays passed being plentifully decorated with bunting'. Further, this same 'Special Correspondent' implies his role as 'eyewitness' to Mr. Barton's speech, particularly in his reception of 'prolonged cheers', to which the Prime Minister 'returned their thanks for the heartiness of their welcome' (January 18, 1901: 5).

According to *The Advertiser's* 'Special Correspondent', the speech, (or that 'splendid oration'), was delivered to a hall that was – again! – 'crowded to the doors'. Although there are none of the 'enthusiastic cheers' that were heard in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus* reports, there are certainly many 'prolonged cheers' and 'enthusiastic demonstrations' performed by 'enthusiastic hearers' (January 18, 1901: 5).

Of *The Advertiser's* journalists, we know very little. While we know that *The Advertiser* was owned by Sir John Langdon Bonython at the time of Australia's first election, of his 'Special Correspondent' who presumably 'eyewitnessed' the 1901 election campaign on behalf of *Advertiser* readership, we know nothing. However, we can speculate that either phrases such as 'crowded to the doors' and 'enthusiastic cheering' were well-worn journalistic clichés of the time, (much as 'alcohol-fuelled violence' is today), or that *The Advertiser's* correspondent was indeed on a rudimentary type of 'zoo plane' with the likes of Mr. Pratt of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and Mr. Maling of *The Argus*.

We can, however, speculate that *The Advertiser's* 'Special Correspondent' was present at West Maitland. His voice is so strong that we can almost hear him describing his 'eyewitness' reportage of Mr. Barton travelling around Sydney during the afternoon, holding electioneering conferences, and also at the West Maitland Town Hall itself, where he was received with 'loud and long-continued cheers' and, apparently, some 'waving of handkerchiefs'. Sir William Lyne, Mr. Deakin and Mr. Kingston were also 'warmly welcomed'. It is doubtful that an author could write with such conviction without 'eyewitnessing' events himself.

This conviction is somewhat mitigated, however, when comparing the similarities between *The Advertiser* and the campaign reportage of other the papers under study. *The Advertiser's* political correspondent certainly emphasised his role as 'eyewitness' possibly even more so than *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Mr. Pratt and *The Argus's* Mr. Maling. And yet the three correspondents use remarkably similar words and phrases in their reportage. We could surmise that one or more papers simply 'pinched' the story from one or more of the others. Looking at the dates, however (all articles were published the day after Barton's historic speech), this conclusion seems somewhat unfair to the journalists involved. Alternatively, it is possible that carbons of key stories were shared among reporters, either in the newsroom or on the ground. The sharing of copy on the ground suggests that somewhat of a 'zoo plane' effect was occurring. If this is not the case, and the rhetorical similarities are a result of competitors working in close proximity, we can theorise that there may have been a type of antediluvian 'zoo plane', naturally occurring during the 1901 election campaign.

In Queensland, the journalist as 'eyewitness' was evidenced in *The Brisbane Courier's* (*The Courier*) claim of access to the cutting edge technology of the time. The account of the Maitland speech (outlining the 'Federal Manifesto') is conveyed 'by telegraph' from *The Courier's* (again 'our') 'Special Reporter'. Here, the Maitland Town Hall is again 'packed', but while audiences in *The Argus*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Advertiser* are 'enthusiastically cheering', the audience in *The Brisbane Courier* merely shows 'great demonstration' of 'popular approval' (January 18, 1901: 5).

Given that the Queensland population was mostly against the White Australia policy, in the main because it would have affected the state's ability to transport Kanaka labour to work the sugar cane fields, the textual difference in coverage compared to *The Courier's* interstate counterparts is understandable. We can, however, surmise that *The Courier's* 'Special Reporter' was engaging in the practice of 'eyewitnessing' because he could describe the 'large gathering' of local residents at the West Maitland station, as well as the placards, 'liberally distributed about town', that announced 'ladies' would be 'rigorously excluded' from the town hall (January 18, 1901: 5).

While newspapers on the mainland were keen to emphasise the role of their 'Special Correspondents'- slash-'Reporters' in 'eyewitnessing' the West Maitland speech, *The Mercury's* coverage is entirely different. By-lined 'By Submarine Cable' and copyrighted to the Tasmanian Press Association, the coverage does not pretend to be anything more than a straightforward translation of a relatively simple – though, for the time, cutting-edge – telegraph message. The article is nothing but a list of facts, with very little journalistic voice. One would presume, however, that while a Tasmanian Press Association reporter was present at the speech, he faced too much complication in making his voice heard in the translated text. However, the final sentence does suggest the writer was functioning as an 'eyewitness': 'Enthusiastic cheers for Mr. Barton and all ministers concluded proceedings,' *The Mercury* reports (January 18, 1901: 3). However, apart from the 'enthusiasm' of the 'cheers' – similar to those reported by *The Mercury's* mainland counterparts – there is very little to suggest the Tasmanian Press Association's representative was aboard any type of 'zoo plane'.

A common practice among metropolitan newspapers of the time appears to be the publication of Barton's speech verbatim. In the modern context, this practice could, quite rightfully, be accused of being nothing but the publication of a direct copy of the original document, subject to none of the expected journalistic conventions such as fact-checking or even 'eyewitnessing'. Yet in each instance, the speech is published complete with audience interjections, including not only cheers and applause but also verbal expressions of support and heckling. This practice either clearly shows 'eyewitnessing' as a common journalistic practice, or it could equally as clearly demonstrate early signs of political 'spin'.

Although 1901 is believed to be too early for the deliberate and organised manipulation of the news media – at least, as it is understood today – we do know that it was occurring, albeit in a somewhat rudimentary fashion. For example, before his life as owner and editor of the groundbreaking *Smith's Weekly*, Claude MacKay

somewhat accidentally found himself press secretary to a local parliamentary candidate. According to MacKay:

“ ... the reports of his meetings were brightly written before they were held. I have always considered myself as one of the pioneers of this now well-recognised method of election campaigning. Under the system we were able to sprinkle our reports with ‘Laughter’, ‘Loud Laughter’, ‘Uproar’, ‘Sensation’, and other parenthetical indications of the effect of a speech upon a lively audience. The reports were always lodged with newspaper sub-editors about eleven in the evening and they unfailingly appeared next morning. Need I say that our candidate won handsomely? (1961: 13). ”

Coincidentally or otherwise, the publication of Australia’s first policy speech made at the West Maitland Town Hall is, in each of the main metropolitan newspapers under investigation at least, ‘sprinkled’ with ‘laughter’, ‘loud laughter’, ‘uproar’, ‘sensation’, and other parentheses. If we are to believe MacKay, we cannot necessarily take these as an indication that the practice of ‘eyewitnessing’ was occurring during Barton’s West Maitland address.

Common to each of the newspapers under investigation is the publication of an accompanying analysis. This is not very different from practices in today’s news media, and is something that does not necessarily indicate ‘eyewitnessing’, or the development of the ‘zoo plane’. What is curious, however, was the tendency to publish short summaries of the analyses of competing papers. *The Argus* published the ‘Press Opinions’ of *The Sydney Morning Herald*; *The Sydney Daily Telegraph*; *The Sydney Evening News*; *The Brisbane Courier*; and *The South Australian Register*. *The Sydney Morning Herald* published the ‘views’ of *The Brisbane Courier* (although considering *The Brisbane Courier*’s unique stance on the White Australia Policy in relation to the ‘coloured labour’ question, publishing it is understandable that *The Sydney Morning Herald* would find newsworthy in its editorial attitude). *The Adelaide Advertiser* published the ‘feeling’ of *The Launceston Daily Telegraph* and attributed several stories about lists of candidates to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. *The Brisbane Courier* published the ‘opinions’ of *The Bundaberg Mail*, *The South Australian Register*, and Melbourne’s *Argus*. Even *The Mercury*, with its meagre political coverage, deemed it appropriate to publish the nub of editorials published in *The Argus* and *The Age* (albeit no more than one sentence for each outlet).

Although the practice of publishing a competitor’s editorials does not strictly relate to the ‘zoo plane’ as a physical entity, it does suggest there may have been a conceptual sense of camaraderie between editors and other content decision-makers – quite possibly based on a mutual desperation for copy. Although not strictly speaking a ‘zoo plane’ effect, it is certainly ‘zoo plane-esque’.

## The Right of Reply

It was not until January 21 – three days after Barton’s West Maitland speech – that the papers under investigation show any indication of the modern journalistic convention of ‘balance’, or publishing the Opposition leader’s ‘right-of-reply’. Putting criticisms of balance aside – the unthinking type of ‘he said she said’ style of journalism – it is accepted journalistic practice that the Opposition has opportunity to publicise their rebuttal to the incumbent’s policies. In the modern context, journalistic practice on ‘zoo plane’ dictates that comments gathered from one campaign trail are immediately ‘phoned through to the correspondent on the opposing trail, in order to create balanced coverage (SBS, 1996). As one reporter told Tiffen (1989):

“ Elections are easy to cover: one guy with the PM, another with the Opposition leader, one waiting in the wings’ (1989: 131). ”

But in 1901, technology, and perhaps the infancy of ‘spin doctoring’, meant that comments from the Opposition leader could not be published to counteract the comments of the incumbent until, at least, the following day. This then foreseeably meant that one correspondent for each news outlet was required for the campaign of both incumbent and opposition.

Compounding the problem was the fact that the Free Trade party leader, George Reid, represented the ‘opposition’ in an unofficial sense only (Simms, 2001b). As such, Australia’s first election did not, officially at least, have an opposition ‘right-of-reply’ policy speech. And yet, Reid was known as a tireless campaigner who travelled through Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania by train, steamer and buggy to speak to, at least, 40 gatherings (Jaensch, 2001). He was also renowned for drawing massive crowds, with at least 8000 (an astoundingly huge number for the time) arriving at Newcastle to hear him speak.

And yet, as Tiffen (1989) points out:

“ Governments enact decisions and because action is more consequential than criticism they are inherently more newsworthy than Oppositions ... Opposition reaction is ‘tacked on at the end’ or even ‘[cut] because of time’ ... Opposition’s views are simply not sought or they are reduced to a role of carping irrelevance (1989: 129). ”

Quite obviously, coverage devoted to Reid in our sample pales in comparison to the pages of news and analysis given to Barton’s speech. The Opposition leader was after all, up against a fairly significant historical first! And yet one would have thought *The Sydney Morning Herald*, known to be ‘somewhat’ free-trade and relatively conservative, would have given Reid more coverage than the comparatively meagre 29 column inches that it did.

But more importantly, at least to this particular investigation, Reid’s right-of-reply suggests that journalists actively sought out, and ‘eyewitnessed’, politicians and their comments face-to-face. Indeed, here *The Sydney Morning Herald* openly asserts personal access to the self-declared Opposition leader:

“ On being interviewed tonight by a representative of the ‘SM Herald’, the article says, ‘Mr. Reid said: ‘I have carefully read the report of Mr Barton’s speech, but will reserve my general review of it until I have addressed the electorate of East Sydney, to whom I have been indebted for so much steady and magnificent support’ (January 21, 1901: 8). ”

And yet veracity of *The Sydney Morning Herald*’s claim to exclusivity, and its role as ‘eyewitness’, is somewhat diminished when comparing its coverage with that of *The Argus*. Strangely, Reid’s right-of-reply in *The Argus* is almost verbatim to its coverage in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, leading us to think that maybe journalists were not ‘eyewitnessing’ politicians as we were initially lead to believe. Here, at least, *The Argus* does not claim to have Mr. Reid exclusively, as does *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The paper merely states that ‘on being interviewed ... Mr. Reid said ...’ (January 21, 1901: 6). Of particular note is duplication of Reid’s somewhat vivid description of Barton’s speech as being one of ‘milk and water’.

The similarities between the two again indicate that copy may have originated from ‘spin doctor’ activity, republished as ‘eyewitness’ reportage. We could also easily surmise that one paper pinched the other’s copy, but again, being published on the same date somewhat mitigates this argument. Alternatively, the similarities may indicate that *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus* correspondents either interviewed the unofficial opposition leader together (as journalists on the ‘zoo plane’ tend to do), or they were working closely enough for somewhat of a ‘zoo plane’ effect to emerge.

Although, by contrast, *The Brisbane Courier* does not claim to have interviewed Reid, it does imply, through its by-line (‘Melbourne, January 20’), that the copy has been obtained by an ‘eyewitness’. Here, Reid gets no more than four sentences, each of which is remarkably similar to the sentences that appear in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus*, particularly his colourful comparison with Barton’s speech as being like ‘milk and water’ (January 21, 1901: 5). In this case we would like to think that the similarities are a result of Reid giving the same interview to the journalists collectively (a practice common on the ‘zoo plane’), rather than through the ‘borrowing’ of another paper’s copy, which would appear unlikely given that Reid’s right-of-reply was published on the same day in all three papers.

In *The Advertiser*, there are but two sentences informing readers that Mr. Reid returned to Melbourne from Launceston two days previously, and was due to visit the South Australian capital at a later date (January 21, 1901: 5). There is very little evidence that an *Advertiser* ‘eyewitness’ had interacted with Reid.

Hobart’s *The Mercury* is no more informative. Of Mr. Reid, there is nothing more than three paragraphs printed on January 21, on page three. This, however, is by-lined by *The Mercury*’s ‘Own Correspondent’ from Launceston (presumably indicating the journalist as ‘eyewitness’). The report, however, includes little more information than the fact that the ‘Right Hon. G.H. Reid’ returned to Launceston today, and left by the ‘S.S. Coogee’ for Melbourne. As the main newspaper on an island state, *The Mercury* was understandably more concerned with shipping news and – as with other Australian papers, albeit to a lesser extent – the Transvaal and the health of the ailing British monarch.

Unfortunately, there is scarce evidence of the East Sydney speech Reid referred to in the pages of any of the outlets under investigation. Officially, according to the Museum of Australian Democracy, Reid did not make a policy speech for the 1901 election, but historians could use the speech he gave in his electorate of East Sydney as somewhat of a replacement to gain a sense of what the unofficial opposition leader might have said, but which was not recorded.

The lack of coverage of Reid's East Sydney speech is pity for historians who are striving to investigate the journalists who 'eyewitnessed' Australia's first election campaign. But this is also a pity for contemporary readers because, apparently, Reid was a mesmerising orator. An apparent master of mixing humour and pathos, Reid once famously told a heckler, who was asking the name of the baby within his ample paunch: 'If it's a boy, I'll call it after myself. If it's a girl I'll call it Victoria. But if, as I strongly suspect, it's nothing but piss and wind, I'll name it after you.' (Grattan, 2000).

In his autobiography, journalist Monty Grover describes Reid as 'the most perfect actor' that politics had 'produced':

“ Reid did not rest satisfied to pronounce the words which made his speeches a delight to scan. They were doubly a delight to hear, for he revealed a mastery of voice control, and the lights and shades of his sentences would have done credit to any big tragedian – or comedian, for Reid was both (in Cannon, 1993: 170). ”

And yet Grover, who was with *The Sydney Morning Herald* during the 1901 election campaign, mentions neither himself nor his colleagues covering any of Reid's speeches during the 1901 campaign.

Despite this, we know *The Sydney Morning Herald* was there because on January 22, 1901, the paper covered Reid's 'vigorous' speech made in Melbourne's Richmond Town Hall. Because it was the first of a series of speeches planned for Victoria and, in the absence of any previous Opposition speech evident since the beginning of the 1901 election campaign, this paper uses its coverage as an example of how journalists reported on the policy speech of Australia's first Opposition leader.

Again, *The Sydney Morning Herald* gives us reason to believe its correspondent acted as 'eyewitness' to Reid's Richmond speech. The *Sydney Morning Herald* writer – possibly Mr. Pratt, who could have foreseeably travelled from Maitland to Richmond in the five days between Barton's speech and that of Reid's – tells us the hall was 'not nearly large enough' to accommodate 'all who desired to attend'. Mr. Reid, says the Melbourne correspondent, had a 'most cordial reception', with the 'prolonged outburst' of cheering 'drowning a feeble attempt at groaning' (January 22, 1901: 5).

*The Argus* also published Reid's speech at Richmond on January 22. Strangely, as in *The Sydney Morning Herald* coverage, there is little evidence in *The Argus* that Reid made a speech at East Sydney. Strangely, *The Argus* too describes the Richmond speech as 'vigorous', but with the added claim that he was greeted by an 'enthusiastic reception'. Here *The Argus* tells us that the Richmond Town Hall was 'much too small for the crowd that assembled last evening to hear Mr. G.H. Reid's address ...', indicating the presence of the journalist – presumably Mr. Maling, who also could have travelled from Sydney to Melbourne in the five-day interim between the two speeches – was an 'eyewitness':

“ At half past 7 the hall was filled and at 8 it was packed, and there was an overflow tailing off from all the doorways.' (Surprisingly, amongst those in the reserved seats were 'some ladies' (!)) Mr Reid's appearance on the platform was, apparently, marked by a 'great outburst' of cheering, which continued for a 'minute or two'. However, as the cheering died, a 'few groans' were heard from the back of the hall (January 22, 1901: 7). ”

Although meagre by comparison (two sentences to be precise), *The Brisbane Courier's* coverage also told readers the Richmond Town Hall was 'much too small' to accommodate those who sought attendance (January 23, 1901: 5).

The rhetorical similarities between the coverage of three outlets, lays a further layer to the theory that the correspondents may have been 'borrowing' each other's copy. In the case of *The Brisbane Courier* – who published coverage of Reid's speech the day after its peers– this is entirely possible. However, given that *The Argus* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* published their coverage on the same day, this accusation does not ring entirely true. It may be that the correspondents from *The Argus* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* were working closely enough on the 'zoo plane' to be interpreting Reid's speech in similar language.

Although *The Advertiser* did not demonstrate the same rhetorical similarities, it does imply the presence of a journalistic 'eyewitness' to Reid's Richmond speech. Mr. Reid, says *The Advertiser*, addressed a 'big meeting' of electors at the Richmond Town Hall 'tonight' (January 22, 1901: 5). Given that *The Advertiser* published its coverage of Reid's speech on the same day as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus*, it had little chance to 'borrow' another outlet's copy. It is not outside the realms of possibility that an Adelaide correspondent was indeed accompanying *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Argus* on somewhat of a 'zoo plane'.



In comparison, evidence of Reid's Richmond speech was curiously absent in *The Mercury*. We can hardly speculate quite why this is so, except to assume either it was not deemed 'newsworthy' enough for Hobart readers, or that *The Mercury* did not have a correspondent on any possible 'zoo plane'. Neither did *The Mercury* publish a reply from the incumbent to Reid's Richmond speech, as all other publications in the sample did. Each claims to have sought out Mr. Barton for interview.

On January 22, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports that Mr. Barton, 'speaking to a 'Herald' reporter yesterday', said he had read Mr. Reid's 'criticisms'. Emphasising the 'reporter's' function as 'eyewitness', and the outlet's use of cutting edge technology ('as telegraphed from Melbourne'), *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports:

“ So far as he [Mr. Barton] could see there was very little that demanded serious attention. Mr. Reid had, he noticed, charged him with being ignorant on subjects relating to the tariff. He was not aware however, that he had displayed any particular want of knowledge when dealing with these questions (January 22, 1901: 5). ”

We would like to think that *The Sydney Morning Herald* was, indeed, functioning as 'eyewitness'. This, however, again becomes unclear when comparing its coverage with that of *The Argus*, who *also* gave Barton's right-of-reply to Reid's – strangely similar – 'criticism':

“ There appeared to be very little in that criticism which demanded serious attention. Mr. Reid charged him with being ignorant on the subject of the tariff. He was not aware however, that he had displayed any particular want of knowledge in dealing with tariff questions (January 22, 1901: 7). ”

*The Advertiser* similarly, also claimed an 'eyewitness' interview with Mr. Barton:

“ Mr. Barton, when questioned to-day on certain remarks Mr. G.H. Reid made to a press interviewer in Melbourne, said he 'did not think there was anything in them which required very serious attention. 'He accuses me', continued the PM, 'of notorious want of knowledge on the subject of tariff. I am not aware that I have made any particular displays of ignorance on the subject (January 22, 1901: 5). ”

Although different in angle (the more locally newsworthy 'Kanakanak Question'), *The Brisbane Courier* also claims to have spoken with Mr. Barton 'in the course of an interview' (January 21, 1901: 5).

The similarities are remarkable. Quite clearly the outlets in question could have been 'borrowing' each other's copy – thus making the claim of 'eyewitness somewhat moot – except that *The Argus* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* published on the same day, and *The Brisbane Courier* published much less information, and with a vastly different, localised angle, than its southern counterparts. So, it is possible that the correspondents were interviewing Reid as a collective, as is common on the 'zoo plane'.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the authenticity of the 'eyewitness' interview in the sample, we do know that journalists did have open access to politicians during this time. For example, *The Age's* George Cockerill actively participated in negotiations preceding William Lyne's unsuccessful attempt to form government. In his largely autobiographical *Scribblers and Statesmen* (1920), Cockerill relays how Lyne used him as an intermediary with *The Age* owner David Syme, who was judged as being pivotal in bringing leaders such as Alfred Deakin and George Turner into his government. According to high profile turn-of-the-century journalist, Bertie Cook, *Sydney Telegraph* reporter, Gerald Mussen was actually at Edmund Barton's house when he received the call from the Governor General to form government in 1901 (unpublished manuscript, nd).

## Conclusion

This exploration has raised far more questions than it has answered. We know that coverage of Australia's first Federal policy speeches were remarkably similar, so much so that we could reasonably accuse outlets of 'pinching' one another's copy. However, given that – in general – coverage in each outlet was published simultaneously, this accusation appears somewhat unfair. An alternative explanation could be that the outlets under question were apathetically republishing the products of early forms of political 'spin'. Although we know from Claude MacKay (1961) that the phenomenon was only emerging in the early 20th century, he describes himself as a 'pioneer' of the craft when he was practising it in 1905. While this is four years after the election of 1901, it is still difficult to believe that political spin would have been practiced with any degree of sophistication during Australia's first election campaign.

An alternative, and preferable, conclusion to the analysis of the rhetorical similarities between the outlets under

question and their coverage of Australia's first election campaign, is that the 'Special Correspondents' of 1901 were indeed subject to the effects of an early type of 'zoo plane', where journalists 'eyewitnessed' the campaign as a collective, resulting in similar – albeit subconscious – interpretation of events. This conclusion, however, would benefit from further investigation, particularly of first-hand accounts – diaries, letters – of the likes of *The Sydney Morning Herald's* W.R. Pratt, and *The Argus's* David Maling, among others. The problem here is that locating such sources – if indeed they exist at all – is akin to searching for the proverbial 'needle in a haystack'. Unlike those who covered the earlier inauguration of the Commonwealth and the swearing in of the 'interim' ministry in Sydney, and the later first opening of Parliament in Melbourne, we have very few leads on the individuals on the 'zoo plane' of Australia's first, 'forgotten' election campaign. This paper, however, goes some way to starting this investigation.

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