



# Littlemore's Flexible Standards

**Stuart Littlemore, presenter of the ABC's *Media Watch* and scourge of media practices, apparently applies different standards when it comes to his own program.**

On 8 November Littlemore - correctly, in *CU's* opinion - castigated the Australian Press Council for recent decisions in which it appeared to bend over backwards to avoid upholding complaints against newspapers. In one case, the Council dismissed a complaint against the publication in the *Cairns Post* of an appalling racist cartoon, on the grounds that the paper had balanced the cartoon by publishing critical letters and comment.

As Littlemore pointed out, the Council is ever ready to invoke its mantra, 'freedom of speech', even when the published material cries out for comment from this body (which, however ineffectual, is the only channel for complaint about the print media).

So far so good. But later in the program, Littlemore gave the *Sydney Morning Herald* a big serve for its reporting of a (rare!) Press Council decision upholding a complaint against the paper. In its report of the Council's decision, the paper 'buried' the adverse finding right at the end of the story, and the reader of the story would have gained the impression that the Council had criticised newspaper practices generally.

## Watching the Watcher

This is ironic in view of the way Littlemore himself handled a recent finding critical of his own program by the ABC's Independent Complaints Review Panel. The full text of the panel's finding is reprinted below.

A 100-word summary of the finding was prepared by the panel for inclusion in the program. This summary was read out after the closing credits,

over a blank screen, and more seriously, was rewritten to give it an emphasis significantly at odds with the prepared statement, and indeed with the panel's finding.

ABC Managing Director David Hill directed that the correct statement be read the following week. And so it was, though Littlemore introduced it with a self-serving preamble asserting the right of *Media Watch* to impartial commentary on the day's news and current affairs.

Thus Littlemore adopts highminded 'free press' rhetoric in relation to his own program while blasting the Press Council for its double standards.

As the panel said in its original finding: 'The legitimacy among ABC television viewers of *Media Watch* - as a regular critic of the performance of the media - might be enhanced, not reduced, if on this occasion it showed itself to be prepared, by virtue of this report, to broadcast an implicit criticism of itself'.

How about looking to the mote in thine own eye, Stuart?

## Background

News reporter Walter Hamilton complained about a *Media Watch* program earlier this year which implied that he had shown pro-ALP bias in two news features screened at the beginning of the 1993 Federal election campaign. Hill referred the complaint to the panel as independent arbitrator.

After reviewing the complaint and *Media Watch's* response, the panel found that the criticism of Hamilton had been unwarranted and unfair and that there was insufficient information to draw the conclusion that he was guilty of personal bias in favour of the ALP. The panel added the rider, however, that TV news committed a serious error of professional judgement in screening the two items consecutively

at the beginning of an election campaign, an error for which Hamilton had to bear significant responsibility.

It was the latter finding which was given pride of place in *Media Watch's* rewording of the panel's summary statement, while the finding that *Media Watch* had treated Hamilton unfairly was tacked as at the end. □

## The Panel's Finding

A *Media Watch* program contained comments on four TV news stories last February, presented by Economics Correspondent Walter Hamilton. Hamilton complained to the Independent Complaints Review Panel that the comments imputed unjustifiably that in preparing the first two stories he was guilty of deliberate pro-ALP bias during the election campaign, which had just begun. The Panel finds that this serious imputation was conveyed by the comments, was not warranted by the evidence and constituted unfair treatment of Hamilton's performance as a reporter. It adds the rider that screening the two stories, with their pro-ALP bias, on successive nights at this crucial point in the campaign was a serious professional misjudgment by TV News, for which Hamilton must bear significant responsibility.