



# The National Press Club

Home of  
Australia's  
fourth estate

Judy Cannon traces the glory days of one of our liveliest public forums

The National Library is always on the outlook for new acquisitions, the distinctly contemporary as well as the traditionally historic. The stories of people and organisations do not need to be old to be important and those gathered as they evolve are especially pertinent if they reflect the national scene.

One organisation whose story has been recorded since inception as very much part of contemporary Australian public life, is that of the National Press Club, based in Canberra. The Library's Oral History Collection contains many tapes and transcripts of addresses given by the club's prestigious lunchtime speakers, together with an impressive photographic archive created by National Library photographers.

The club had a modest start in a Canberra pub but in the 1970s and 1980s achieved eminence in the nation's calendar of events.

The idea for a press club came when a few journalists, as they do and hopefully always will, gathered for a beer and a yarn in 1962, in this case at the Hotel Kingston, and came up with the idea of a national press luncheon club.

According to papers lodged with the National Library by Lee Catmull, a journalist with the *Melbourne Sun* who was a National Press Luncheon Club founding committee member and secretary from 1963 to 1970,

the idea took off with the backing of federal parliamentary press gallery and public service journalists. The formal go-ahead came from a meeting of the Australian Journalists Association that September, assisted by a report produced by Christopher Forsyth (*The Age*), John Leonart (*The Canberra Times*) and Joe Colgan.

The National Press Luncheon Club's new committee was chaired by Tony Eggleton, Navy public relations man and later Federal Director of the Liberal Party, with members including Forsyth, Leonart, Harry Keen and Norman Hoffman (Dept of Immigration), Neil O'Reilly (*Sydney Sun*), John Rich (*The Sydney Morning Herald*), N. Browning (*The Canberra Times*), Eric Sparke (Australian News & Information Bureau), Noel Tanswell (RAAF), ex-officio Australian Journalists Association president Harold Eather and George Randall. Lee Catmull and Don Lawler (Dept of Immigration) were also invited to join the committee.

External Affairs Minister Sir Garfield Barwick was speaker for the first club luncheon at the Hotel Canberra on 17 June 1963. Sir Garfield, Chief Justice of the High Court 1961–81, was to return to the club 13 years later when, operating on the lines of Washington's National Press Club, it had its own impressive premises of 15 000 square feet.

Renamed the National Press Club at its incorporation in October 1968, the organisation's new \$3.5m building was at 16 National Circuit, Barton and incorporated leased accommodation for lobbyists and the US Information Service. It was officially

opened by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser on May 17 1976. Among guests were former prime minister Gough Whitlam, other parliamentarians, diplomats, and representatives of industry, the public service, sponsors, editors and journalists.

It is interesting to speculate whether the founding journalists ever envisaged a club possessing the influence it so soon achieved, or that future speakers would include the eminent, the international, the royal, the presidential, and sometimes, in retrospect, the notorious. The speakers list is, for the club, a kind of drum roll of honour.

Politicians and the political have always had the rostrum made available to them in times of election and drama, but speakers have also come from a broad spectrum of professions. They have included diplomats, scientists, writers, entrepreneurs, academics and sports personalities, both national and international. Many have come armed with a message, relishing the opportunity to speak to so many journalists in one hit; others, especially actors and comedians, have come to entertain, or delightfully, just to be themselves.

The National Library has consistently tape-recorded both speeches and question-and-answer sessions and has built up an impressive collection of speakers' portraits, together with some hilarious caricatures.

National Press Club membership has remained diverse attracting, in addition to journalists, diplomats, representatives of commerce, academics, military and public service personnel and those active in community organisations. It has a great attraction for local business people.

According to the Lee Catmull material, on the bar's opening night, an imbiber—it had to

be a journalist—was found comfortably asleep on the carpet about 12.30 am. He was put in a cab by friends and dispatched to distant Belconnen. His friends returned to the bar congratulating themselves on their sagacity in refusing to allow their mate to drive himself home, only to learn a few days later that that was *exactly* what he had done. With absolutely no recollection of the taxi ride or of subsequently going back for his car, he awoke at home the next morning to find his car neatly parked in his driveway. This was a time when measures to keep drunk drivers off the road had not yet won general acceptance.

Marjorie Turbayne, manager in the early days and wise to the ways of men, noticed one day that the car of a committee member—who had seen everyone off the premises at 2.30am—had been left in the front driveway. Suspecting he had fallen asleep and spent the night in the car, she checked. No one was inside the car, so being savvy, she also checked under the car. The reality was the vehicle had refused to start and he had been given a lift home. No members' names attach to these stories.

The club's program soon expanded to evening dining and entertainers were hired, as in large social and sports clubs. Artists have included singer Marcia Hines and The Fortified Few, as well as jazzmen Don Burrows and James Morrison. Jazz, blues and individual performances continue today with the Saturday night cabaret, currently under the stewardship of Bill Stephens, coincidentally one of the National Library's valued oral history interviewers for the performing arts.

As the club grew more successful the strain began to tell on committee members

opposite:

Left to right: Mr H. Keen, Mr G. Randall, Sir Garfield, Mr T. Eggleton, Mr D. Lawler and Mr G. Burgoyne at the inaugural National Press Club luncheon on 17 June 1963 b&w negative; 8.5 x 10.9 cm Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23123868 Courtesy of Marietta Troeth, National Press Club

below left:

Loui Seselja (b.1948) [*Gough and Margaret Whitlam and Bob McMullan at the Opening Ceremony of the National Museum of Australia, 11 March 2001*] b&w negative; 5.5 x 5.5 cm Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23301956

below:

Loui Seselja (b.1948) *Gabi Hollows, Unidentified Aboriginal Man, Malcolm Fraser and Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue Holding Hands after the Journey of Healing Ceremony at Corroboree 2000* gelatin silver photograph; 20.4 x 25.5 cm Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24523610



and staff alike. After five years as president from 1971 to 1977, T. Max Hawkins decided he could no longer occupy the position in combination with his professional and family responsibilities. He was also concerned that key staff members were working long hours and needed time for families and relaxation. Success had its down side.

The NPC has had the good fortune to attract long-term presidents but, so far, Gay Davidson has been the only woman to serve a term. Current president Ken Randall was appointed to the board in 1975 and has been re-elected each year since. An ABC TV presenter on political issues and current affairs, he has been an executive member since 1977 and in 1997 was awarded an AM primary for his service to the club.

The luncheon remains the club's primary focus. The pattern has invariably been a formal address, usually televised, followed by questions from media members. Question time, especially when a hot issue is running, can often be lively and speakers can be given something of a battering. An inveterate questioner for years was the late Bruce Juddery, often regarded by fellow journalists as something of an *enfant terrible*. Although he enjoyed a drink, for years he invariably asked penetrating questions—once he got through his wordy preamble. His presence is missed.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the club virtually created a *Who's Who* of speakers. Fewer VIP international speakers are now

able to accept an invitation because of security reasons and because constraints demand fly-in fly-out visits. In response, the club has initiated National Press Club events in Sydney and Melbourne.

Past speakers, at random and in no order of precedence, most of whom have autographed the club's visitors' book, include Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, E.G. Whitlam, both as Opposition leader and Prime Minister, Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdul Razak, United Nations Secretary-General Dr Kurt Waldheim, King Hussein of Jordan, Israeli Defence Minister General Moshe Dayan, Dr H.C. (Nugget) Coombs as Chairman of the Royal Commission into Public Administration, Prime Minister of Japan Yusuhiro Nakasone, the actor and writer Peter Ustinov, United States Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Richard Nixon, Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, the Duke of Edinburgh, Barry 'Edna Everage' Humphries, Lord Thomson of Fleet, the United Kingdom and Canada newspaper proprietor, Prime Minister of India Mrs Indira Gandhi, round-the-world yachtsman Sir Francis Chichester, South Vietnam Prime Minister Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, tennis champion John Newcombe, comedian Joyce Grenfell, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, comedians Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, writer Germaine Greer, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Chairman of the Northern Lands Council, scientist Sir Mark Oliphant, Green Ban activist Jack Munday, US leader of the

below left:

Sir Robert Menzies holding a caricature of himself [196-?] b&w negative; 5.5 x 5.5 cm Australian Information Service photograph Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23324002

below right:

Alan Moir (b.1945) *Burying Differences [Gough Whitlam and Lee Kuan Yew]* 1974 pen, ink and wash on board drawing; image 16.3 x 10.4 cm, on sheet 24.0 x 16.2 cm Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3080098





Moral Majority Jerry Falwell, High Court Justice Lionel Murphy, His Holiness the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, Prime Minister of Fiji Ratu Sir Kamiseva Mara, the Shah of Iran, Sir Richard Attenborough, former governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten, Australian actor Jack Thompson, former UK politician and author Jeffrey Archer and Francis James, the Australian journalist who was held in a Chinese prison for three years and who wrote under his signature, '(i.e. Pavlov, K.G.B.)'

One reference in the Lee Catmull records is a reminder, however, that a press club is not always about the great, the notorious or the powerful. He noted that, in 1976, the committee approved the purchase of a cookbook at \$47.50—for the chef.

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left: John Spooner (b.1946)  
[Caricature Portrait of Al Grassby]  
[1986]  
pen, ink and brush drawing; 20 x 19 cm  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an13983616

right: Don McMurdo (1930–2001)  
[Portrait of Marcia Hines at the  
Australia Day Concert (i.e. Australia  
Day Live), Sydney Entertainment  
Centre, January 1984]  
col. transparency; 35 mm  
Part of Don McMurdo Performing Arts  
Collection  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23357890

## New Voyagings on Old Seas

### Performances in Honour of Professor Greg Dening

The XIIIth David Nichol Smith Conference in Eighteenth-Century Studies  
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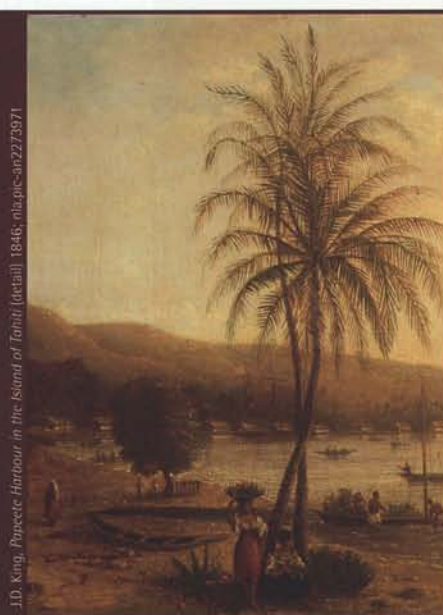
Tuesday 20 – Thursday 22 July 2004  
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#### Registration Fees:

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Early Bird Rate (by 25 June): \$225  
Concession Rate: \$120; Daily Rate: \$70  
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Enquiries and Bookings: (02) 6125 4357 or [leena.messina@anu.edu.au](mailto:leena.messina@anu.edu.au)

The XIIIth David Nichol Smith Conference will celebrate the achievements of Professor Greg Dening, who has changed the way the making of history is considered. The conference will focus on the history of cross-cultural interaction and exchange in Oceania, with papers by leading Indigenous Pacific scholars. The conference will also provide the opportunity to launch *South Seas*, an innovative web-based resource devoted to Cook's momentous first Pacific voyage.



J.D. King, *Papeete Harbour in the Island of Tahiti (detail)* 1846; nla.pic-an2273971