

# From 'watchdog' to 'spin-doctor':

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An examination of the transition from journalist to  
parliamentary media adviser and back again

Caroline Fisher

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# Abstract

This thesis examines the under-explored career transition between two roles at the centre of political communication – the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser. They are two roles commonly portrayed as antithetical to each other, locked in a power struggle over the control of information. This oppositional framing is most easily recognised in the ubiquitous binary stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist scrutinising government, seeking truth and informing in the public interest; and the manipulative ‘spin-doctor’ engaged in advocacy, persuasion, obfuscation and lying. Inspired by the researcher’s own experience, this inductive qualitative study draws on the traditions of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to examine the individual journey of twenty-one journalists who sought to make the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. Via the unique comparative insights of the interviewees, this doctoral study sheds light on key issues arising from the transition through these two pivotal roles. Firstly, this thesis reveals the inadequacy of the blunt, dualistic conceptions of the journalist and parliamentary media adviser in the literature and popular culture. Secondly, this thesis offers insights into the interaction between reporters and parliamentary media advisers and reveals how the actors’ perceptions of the others’ behaviour can influence trust and ultimately the free flow of information to the public via the media. Thirdly, this thesis draws attention to the complex issues of partisanship, conflict of interest and bias that a journalist can face if they seek to return to political reporting once they have been a parliamentary media adviser. Based on the expert perceptions of communications professionals who have worked in both roles, this thesis argues it is time to rethink the blunt, black and white ethical distinctions between the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser and adopt a more nuanced interpretation of these two key roles at the heart of political communication that better reflect the diversity of contextualised individual practitioner experience.

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I also wish to thank my supervisor Assoc. Professor Kerry McCallum for her valuable insights and support. I wish to add special thanks to my primary supervisor, Dr Adam Dickerson, whose generosity, encouragement and belief in this project helped contain my feelings of self doubt and got me through to the end.

Lastly I want to acknowledge the contribution of Anna Bligh and thank her for her friendship, mentorship and courage in exploring the issues central to this thesis – “To thine own self be true” –Thank you.

## Dedication

To my darling husband Matthew Franklin for his courageous decision to leave a successful career in political journalism and carve a new path for himself. It not only gave him new freedom but it also allowed me to devote myself to the completion of this thesis while he took over the care of our two beautiful children. I would not have got to the end without him. It has been an amazing gift. Thank you. To my daughters Hana and Margot, who rarely complained about my absent mindedness while I mulled over this thesis. Thank you for your patience. If this PhD achieves nothing more than to show you both that perseverance pays, then it will have all been worth it.

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# Foreword

This research project grew out of my own experience of crossing-over from journalism to parliamentary media advising and later returning to journalism. It was a career transition that presented me with ethical challenges. Given the role of the journalist and the role of the parliamentary media adviser operate at the centre of political communication, I believed exploring those personal challenges would not only be of interest to me, but would have broader public interest. Borrowing from C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) I felt my “private troubles” were also “public issues” worthy of exploration and discussion. I wanted to discover whether other journalists who had revolved through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser had confronted similar ethical challenges. To help explain my motivation for this research I have provided a brief autobiographic sketch of my experience and some of the “personal troubles” that arose out of it.

In 1994 I joined the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in Queensland as a cadet television news reporter and spent the first two years working in the Brisbane newsroom. This was followed by a two-year posting to Townsville where I worked as the North Queensland correspondent. It was a fascinating and fulfilling job covering stories from the Torres Strait to Mount Isa. However, for a range of personal and professional reasons I wanted to return to Brisbane and the only way I could do that was to leave the ABC. I had always been interested in politics. News and current affairs were the staple of conversation around my dinner table as I grew up. My mother had been active in the peace movement in the 1980s and ran for the Senate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party and I also had friends who worked for political parties. While I was in Townsville I was approached by a federal politician to work for him, but turned down the opportunity. However, a few months later when the Beattie Labor government was elected in 1998 the timing and circumstances were such that I made the leap and joined the staff of Anna Bligh MP, as her Senior Media Adviser. After three exciting and exhausting years I took a much needed six month break before gradually making my way back to the ABC in a mixture of producing and reporting roles at Radio National and ABC News.

Each stage of my transition between reporting and parliamentary media advising presented me with issues of conflict, beginning with my decision to cross over to the ‘dark-side’<sup>1</sup> as it is commonly referred to by journalists. To explain further how these issues of conflict manifested themselves I have provided a more detailed outline below.

*Conflicting nature of the roles and goals:*

When I made the transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser the central values of balance and fairness enshrined in the journalists’ code of ethics were no longer required. As a ministerial media adviser I was employed to present just one side of the story. In the first few months of joining the minister’s office I approached media inquiries with the journalists’ interests at heart trying to provide as much information as possible, but gradually that changed. The more access I had to sensitive information and internal government processes, the more I realised there was information that could not be released and often for good reasons. When pressure from the media was at its most intense my commitment to openness was strained by relentless media inquiries. Over-time, my former journalistic goal to scrutinise government activity was gradually replaced by a protective loyalty to my minister. After three years as a ministerial media adviser my views of journalism had begun to change and my respect for certain individuals in the profession had plummeted.

*Ethical conflict:*

While I was proud of many of the policy reforms the government had achieved and the small role I had played in helping to reach those goals, certain decisions were being taken about the presentation of information that made me feel ethically uncomfortable. During my three years as a ministerial media adviser I faced innumerable ethical decisions –some big, some small – about the release and presentation of information. Though some of those decisions were difficult, I was comfortable in the end with the choices that were made. However, there was one incident

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘dark-side’ is regularly used by the interviewees in this study in reference to comments made by other journalists about their transition to parliamentary media advising. The term is also used to refer to public relations generally (Macnamara, 2012).

that did make me reconsider my employment and that was over the representation of funding for a particular election commitment. As a former ministerial adviser I am bound not to reveal the details of political decisions made during the time I was employed in the minister's office, however, without divulging too much detail I will paint a general picture of the scenario at the heart of my dilemma. I was required to prepare a press release about the government's election commitment in a particular portfolio area. Though the total amount of funding that appeared in the media release was correct it did not reveal the accurate breakdown of those funds. The government had promised that a certain amount would be recurrent (ongoing) funding, and the rest would be capital (one-off) expenditure. By lumping the total funds together, the government attempted to hide that it was not delivering the promised amount of recurrent funding. To the media and the broader public this omission of accounting detail was not important and my concern would have likely been deemed petty, but to the sector concerned, the way in which those funds were to be allocated was of real significance. Up until this point our office had been meticulously transparent in its communications of funding commitments because there was a strong sense of pride in the fact that much-needed money was being injected into a long neglected system. Because of this track record of transparency, the exclusion of the relevant funding detail in this announcement felt like a significant departure. It was not a lie – the total funding amount was correct – but it was not the truth either. For the first time we had 'spun' the numbers and I felt very uncomfortable about it. To place this small incident in some broader context, the decision not to reveal the actual breakdown of funds occurred during the 2001 Queensland state election when the Labor government's re-election chances were clouded by the investigations of the Shepherdson Inquiry into allegations of electoral fraud in the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party. It was a serious issue that dogged the government for months. Three sitting Labor MPs were forced to resign including the Deputy Premier, Jim Elder, which led to the Premier, Peter Beattie, famously donning a wet suit and swimming with sharks to illustrate the precarious situation the government was in. As a result of this high-stakes election context, the decision was made in our ministerial office to 'spin' the numbers. At the time I made my discomfort with the tactic known and with the agreement of the minister I refused to answer any media inquiries about the matter and arranged to put all questions about it straight through to the minister. In doing so, I effectively temporarily renounced my role. As it

turned out, the minister's office did not receive a single call from a journalist or the sector about the funding figures. Over subsequent budgets all of the money that had been initially promised to the sector was delivered. However, they were not outcomes that I could have foreseen at the time. A few months after the election I was exhausted and my personal life was disintegrating. Combined with the fear that I would have to face more of these situations in the future, I decided to leave parliamentary media advising behind, but not without a heavy heart.

*Conflict of interest & bias:*

After six months' rest, my first attempt to re-enter journalism was painful. I was told by a news director "you'd be lucky" to get a job because I had worked as a parliamentary media adviser and he would only be prepared to employ me on a trial basis. It shook my confidence and I declined the offer. After a few months I found employment in a role that valued my political experience and insights rather than seeing them as a handicap. My time as an adviser had taught me how the political, parliamentary and party processes worked, but it came at a price and that was the loss of my objectivity in relation to my minister. I had a clear conflict of interest when it came to her. After three years of defending and promoting Anna Bligh, I simply was not able to turn around and begin scrutinising my former boss who had also become my friend. I just could not be neutral about her. Instead I took a long and circuitous route back to news reporting. It was not until I had moved interstate and several years had passed before I felt confident that I would no longer face a conflict of interest if I was required to report on politics.

In the years since I left the newsroom I have reflected on the two roles I performed at the heart of political communication. Outwardly I managed to move from journalist to parliamentary media adviser with relative ease, but inwardly I grappled with issues of ethical conflict surrounding them. This doctoral study has been an attempt to explore some of those issues by examining the experience of other journalists who followed the same career path.