
BIOGRAPHY

VIC CARROLL: MEDIA MAN

Evan Jones

Print media people have a habit of saying how significant is their influence. And they have a ready vehicle for their self-congratulations.

One person who deserves the accolades is newspaperman Victor Carroll. Carroll gained recognition in 2006 by being interviewed for posterity by the National Library of Australia (National Library of Australia, 2006). In 2013 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by Macquarie University (Powell, 2013). This kudos would have eluded the general public.

If at all, the reading public would know Vic Carroll as an inveterate columnist and letter writer to the Fairfax press. Over more than two decades, sometimes every second week, he would be in the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *Australian Financial Review*. This man has had multiple bees in his bonnet.

Our subject had inauspicious beginnings in small town Queensland. As compensation for war service, he gained entry to Queensland University via the Labor Government's Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme and he graduated with a degree in economics and history.

Carroll's entry into the print media was fortuitous. Lacking the old school tie, there was the rugby connection. Thus he landed his first job in 1950 in a stockbroking firm. Briefly, he writes as a stringer for the *arriviste* weekly *Australian Financial Review* (launched on 16 August 1951). With the rugby connection again, he landed his first journalism job with the *Courier Mail* in 1952 – covering the then narrowly conceived reporting of stockmarket activity.

Courtesy of the rarity of stockmarket journalists, Carroll moved to Fairfax and Sydney in 1960, becoming finance editor of the *Sun Herald*

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and writing for the *AFR*. In 1964, Carroll was appointed editor of the now daily *AFR*. He was appointed Managing Editor of the *AFR* and *National Times* in 1970, until 1975. In 1980, he became Editor then Editor in Chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald* until 1984.

Carroll's ascendancy to senior management in Fairfax was anything but fortuitous. Albert Smith, then *AFR* sub-editor, noted (Smith, 1987):

... in mid-1964, management made an inspired choice of Mr V.J. Carroll as editor. Mr Vic Carroll till then had been regarded as something of a loner, but proved himself an outstanding leader. Although he had an ailing wife and a young family, he drove himself (and the rest of us) relentlessly, working prodigious hours. No less creative than his predecessor, Mr Max Newton, Carroll brought to the Review deep insights into the sharemarket and, unlike many newspaper executives, really understood marketing. He was also a great judge of talent.

Peter Robinson complemented the compliments (Robinson, 1988):

Vic Carroll was a man of wide interests and insatiable curiosity, underpinned by a subtle and pointed sense of humour; where another editor might have been consumed with righteous rage, calling down every curse on those who tormented him, Carroll could usually see a wryly funny side. It was just as well because the evolution of the Financial Review into something like the comprehensive mixture it is today was not achieved without pain.

Andrew Clark concurs (Clark, 2013):

Shortish, well-built, a good body-surfer and accomplished fisherman, Carroll combined an athletic intellect, extraordinary work ethic, curiosity, technical skills, razor-sharp understanding of business and markets, a shrewd take on politics, the capacity to ask the right questions, good judgment of journalistic potential, and, possibly most importantly, a mulish streak of independence.

Carroll was also an early supporter of affirmative action hiring. And he patiently mentored junior reporters. He was labeled 'the Sorcerer' for his talent in recruiting able apprentices.

Carroll claims that the *AFR* was effectively run as a *SMH* satellite during the 1950s. That changed when the hyperactive Maxwell Newton was appointed editor in February 1960. Newton made the paper a bi-weekly (Tuesday and Thursday) in October 1961 and a daily in October 1963. Customers had to be converted to daily exposure, and the price had to be dropped.

Of necessity, but out of conviction, Carroll broadened the coverage of the *Fin*. In the context of a dramatically evolving political economy, economic policy in general and politics were to be now in the mix. Under the influence of Peter Robinson, previously long resident in Japan, the *Fin* emphasised the necessity for Australia's orientation to Asia. Business coverage was to receive greater depth – a revolution. Carroll sought to penetrate the corporate veil that facilitated business operations with minimum exposure. The monopolies BHP and CSR were particularly in his sights.

With Rupert Murdoch establishing *The Australian* in July 1964, the competition was on for a genuinely national coverage by the print media.

Carroll early confronted and fought an entrenched State-centred provinciality – of most businesses, of newspapers, of advertisers and of journalists. The *Fin* provided a vehicle to transcend this provinciality. Federalism was evidently a work in progress. It remains so. The issue concerned Carroll indefinitely.

The *National Times* was created in 1971 to enhance Fairfax's 'big picture' coverage. Staff of the *National Times* were given the luxury to research a story in depth. Unsurprisingly, it irritated those in power, exemplified by Evan Whitton's articles on the Vietnam War (prefaced by the Petrov Affair and the Melbourne-Voyager collision cover-up) and Brian Toohey's articles on Labor politics. The paper consistently lost money, but so did the *AFR* for years. Management bravely took a long-sighted view but the disastrous takeover of Fairfax in 1987 sealed the fate of this marvellous adventure.

Good businessman as well, Carroll was opportunistically attuned to broadening coverage on 'lifestyle' issues and increasing the lifeblood advertising revenues.

Carroll followed in the footsteps of Rupert Henderson, long time managing director of Fairfax – Henderson's entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* is authored by Carroll (2007). Henderson headed off successive challenges from rival newspaper groups and rival media for his employers.

In late 1969, Carroll introduced the Saleroom in the *AFR* under Terry Ingram, catering simultaneously to the money heads and the culture vultures. In July 1974, Carroll instigated, with Robert Gottliebsen, the Chanticleer column on the *AFR*'s back page.

At the *National Times*, with Trevor Kennedy and Max Suich ramping up circulation, says Carroll (National Library of Australia, 2006, Disc 2): 'We made a beeline for German motors. Mercedes, BMWs were just coming into the country. A prestige range. That was made for us. We exploited it as much as we could. A fair amount of advertising. A good price.' Those and comparable advertisements became a fixture – the price of getting those weekly political and commercial exposés.

At the *SMH* after 1980, Carroll remade the layout. He refashioned the back page which became, on advice, 'Stay in Touch'. David Dale was there to give it zing. Neville Wran, Labor Premier and perennial subject, was not happy. There followed, under Eric Beecher's inspiration, the (TV) Guide and Good Living in mid-1982.

Vic Carroll had long been attracted to the significance of the letters page. Sometime in 1956, Rupert Henderson noticed a letter in the *SMH* from one Maxwell Newton, then a bank economist. Henderson offered Newton a job on the *Herald*, where he became Canberra correspondent. Newton subsequently forced his way into the editorship of the *AFR*, which he revolutionised. Carroll replaced Newton in 1964 when the latter moved to Murdoch's new flagship *The Australian*. It was Carroll's immediate job to restrict the loss of journalistic talent following Newton to Murdoch.

Carroll remembered the significance of the Newton letter when he read a letter by one A. Lampe in the *AFR*. Carroll got Trevor Kennedy, running the Melbourne office, to contact the letter writer and thus Anne Lampe was hired.

The immediate target of Carroll and Lampe was the insurance sector. Claimed Carroll (National Library of Australia, 2006, Disc 2):

The life offices had led a charmed life till then. They'd had all the tax advantages; advantage of a young population, expanding rapidly, and migrants. Their annual reports were completely mysterious documents. No-one could understand them. No-one took any notice of them. They were becoming major investors in the cities. I said we have to show the same critical analyses to the life offices as we do to BHP, CSR, the banks, etc. Anne Lampe started to do that.

And of course that gave us problems. Sir Vincent Fairfax was a director of the AMP. And the Fairfaxes had been among the founders of the AMP. The AMP got very bitter about Anne. We got very critical memos from the Chairman about what we were doing to the life

offices. But anyhow we won that argument. We couldn't lose it. The public interest was such that they had to open themselves up.

Carroll's attraction to the letters page brought him a new life after his retirement from Fairfax in 1985. Carroll became the world champion letter writer for well over two decades in the *SMH* and *AFR*. Carroll's Honorary Doctorate was due to Michael Egan, the then Macquarie University Chancellor and sometime NSW Labor Treasurer, who 'had nominated the editor, journalist and active writer of "amazing" letters to the editor because Dr Carroll had always stood out from his peers' (Power, 2013).

As the *AFR* pushed itself to prominence in the late 1960s, a signature theme was its stance against the then tariff protection regime that sheltered the domestic manufacturing sector. A battle raged between the Country Party leader and Minister for Trade and Industry, Jack McEwen – and his entourage – and the Tariff Board Chairman, Alf Rattigan – with his academic economists support team (Jones, 2016).

The tide turned with the retirement of McEwen in 1971 and the replacement by the incoming Whitlam Government of the Tariff Board by the Industries Assistance Commission. The inaptly-named IAC had as its agenda the comprehensive dismantling of assistance to manufacturing industry and the rural sector to liberate 'market forces' and the presumed efficient society-wide allocation of resources. The parallel worlds met in the person of Carroll's colleague Peter Robinson, who left his editorship (on Rattigan's invitation) of the *AFR* to become an IAC Commissioner during 1974-78 before returning to Fairfax.

Into the 1980s, the *Fin* championed fiscal restraint and labour force deregulation. The love affair between successive Labor Governments and the IAC (which became the Industry Commission, then the Productivity Commission) broadened the 'economic reform' agenda. The *Fin* stood full square behind it, hectoring governments if it found any deviation from the purification motif.

The odd senior editor has claimed for their paper prime responsibility for leading the country out of darkness into light. Peter Robinson (1988) claimed that 'Many of the battles fought over the past quarter of a century through the pages of the Financial Review have been won in the sense that the rationalist approach has become the conventional wisdom.' When one has rationalism on one's side, the enemy has difficulty transcending the linguistic moral opprobrium.

Most of Carroll's close colleagues and those younger that he nurtured have been integral members of the purification team – a mentality that spread into economic commentary beyond the *Fin*. Carroll distinguished himself by taking a different course. In article after article, letter after letter, Carroll expressed concern for the post-reform structure of the economy. Rather than the purists' orientation to fine tuning of a model essentially well-built, Carroll perennially expressed concern that the post-reform structure was structurally flawed.

Carroll had developed a fine eye for the vagrancy of corporate practices and culture. It was a rare capacity, rivalled only by the omnibus knowledge of Trevor Sykes. Towards such exposure, Carroll penned a masterly analysis of the merits and pitfalls of company histories (1998).

Beyond the mastery of fine detail, Carroll grasped the imperatives of corporate capital in the tropist search for market control and subsequent abuse, and the failure of corporate law and the regulators to combat it. The 1980s provided copious raw material.

Carroll stood against the prevailing current amongst his peers regarding 'economic fundamentalism', as reflected in unthinking privatisations and deregulation – especially of public infrastructure.

Carroll was particularly concerned with developments in the financial sphere and with the state of financial and monetary regulation.

The issue of the *AFR* on 16 August 2001 heralded its 50 year anniversary, with much self-congratulation on show. Fairfax journalist Brian Toohey implicitly paid tribute to Carroll's preoccupations (Toohey, 2001):

While maintaining one of its greatest strengths allowing a diversity of opinion within its pages the *AFR* at an editorial level enthusiastically endorsed [the economic] reforms. But it probably did not play such a leading role in building the momentum for change as in the earlier debates over tariffs. It might also be argued that the paper with almost everyone else failed to foresee some of the excesses generated by the reform process. The worst was the mad bank lending boom that culminated in the deep recession of 1990-91.

Carroll reinforced his sceptical orientation with a deep reading of financial institutional history. Carroll claimed that he had compensated for his 'light-on' courses at university by reading widely. The practice evidently stuck with him.

Examples of Carroll's percipience flowed from his pen.

Carroll dissected the newly liberated banks' 1980s lending madness in Max Suich's *Independent Monthly* (Carroll, 1990a). Of note:

... economists continued to fight inflation on the wages front although real wages were falling. Those who had discovered that power and influence are exercised through networks were concentrating on the Industrial Relations Club instead of the Money Relations Club.

The rampant excesses of the banks and the resulting crisis produced a beautiful comparison with the bank-led speculative boom and bust of the late 1830s and early 1840s (Carroll, 1992):

... in general the solutions proposed were similar to those proposed today: cut spending, keep wages down and reduce interest rates and wait for business to turn up. As usual in business cycles, much more effort went into devising a soft landing from the last boom than into producing a safer flight to the next. ... For entrepreneurs and their financiers the rewards for success thus expand while the penalties for failure shrink. The big market penalties are borne by the unemployed. Who's for the next boom?

Carroll continued the theme with his review of Trevor Sykes' *The Bold Riders* (Carroll, 1994):

All of these booms and busts were based on the unbridled expansion of credit to, and borrowing by, people who had no idea how they were going to repay the money and, in many cases, no intention of doing so. [Quoting Sykes] 'The big factor underlying the crashes of the late 1980s was the prostitution of the banking system.'

And where were the financial regulators? Deprived of powers following deregulation, the regulators lost control of lending, not least via the explosion of sophisticated financial instruments. Carroll treated the Reserve Bank of Australia's 'jawboning' as a farce.

The RBA's and the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority's major role has been in propping up the errant banks and intermediaries after the chaos has occurred.

More, the RBA's much-followed fine-tuning of the cash rate was essentially 'a political convenience' (Carroll, 2000), mostly irrelevant because following rather than leading the money market. The innate problem was in the post-deregulation contradiction: The cash rate soap opera:

[couldn't] bridge the deep fault line which runs through monetary policy: the gap between the central bank's commitment to order, discipline and the stability of the currency and the banking system

[preferring bank concentration], and the general commitment of all economic policy to open, free, competitive markets, particularly money markets which are all about risk, energy, enterprise and the inevitable mayhem that occasionally follows.

In his schematic orientation, Carroll located two nodes of economic power and a significant shift in hegemony between them – from a Melbourne-based industry-centred club behind protectionist battlements to a Sydney-based finance-centred club, buoyed by financial globalisation (Carroll, 2004). Within the latter, including a complicit class of regulators, no out-of-control financial facility or predatory scam has been off limits.

The systemic dysfunctionality of the new regime possessed Carroll because it had invaded his personal domain. The destruction of John Fairfax Ltd in late 1987 was only possible because of the lunacy of the banking sector that financed its takeover by the hapless Warwick Fairfax Jr and the latter's entourage of spivs. From this despoliation on home turf Carroll wrote his *The Man Who Couldn't Wait* (1990b).

It appears plausible that the remarkable career of Carroll and his peers was a product of the then dynastic character of Fairfax media. Admittedly, there was the 'rivers of gold' of the classified advertising. But there was also the tolerant patronage fought for by Carroll and his peers and successors, resented but reluctantly accommodated by Warwick Fairfax – according to Evan Whitton (2013), Carroll the key figure besting the autocrat – and achieved under the benign chairmanship of Warwick's cousin James.

The latter day Fairfax Media is a poor shadow of its antecedent. And there is more involved than the bottom-line pressure of plummeting advertising revenue. Foreign coverage has been given over to fake verities reproduced from the Anglo-metropolitan establishment media.

Admittedly, Fairfax management has facilitated the running exposés of Adele Ferguson and colleagues of a succession of Commonwealth Bank scams and of selective workplace exploitation scams. But the *SMH's* business coverage has been slashed, now seemingly arbitrary without focus. Paddy Manning was sacked in 2013 for highlighting the *SMH's* relative objectivity regarding business reporting compared to that of the *AFR*.

In 2004, *SMH* management closed down Anne Lampe's exposure of bank malpractice against small business and farmer customers. The subject

(and corporate predation in general against small business) remains under the radar. In 2016, Fairfax sacked Michael West for his having the audacity to forensically pursue deep-rooted corporate spivvery.

The *AFR* has sunk gradually into irrelevance as its long time editorial purity has been supplemented by complicity. The *AFR* has long displayed an inconsistency in attacking the ‘pork barrelling’ of the manufacturing and rural sectors while steadfastly ignoring same in finance, mining and property.

In finance, the attraction of privileged access to senior management has produced a significant lacuna in investigative reporting. Most recently, reportage of a succession of Parliamentary inquiries into banking malpractice, culminating in a Banking Royal Commission, has been met by silence or disgraceful reproduction of the banks’ mantra.

After a sterling career, Vic Carroll maintained the rage as a public intellectual. The current generation of journalists works in more straitened circumstances. But Carroll provides a model for those with a dogged concern for the commonweal in the assertive use of their talents.

Evan Jones is an honorary associate in the Department of Political Economy, University of Sydney.

evan.jones@sydney.edu.au

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