

Cut Through, July 30, 2026: **NACC emails exposed, Tony Abbott's strange mistake and Peter Malinauskas' News Corp bestie**

All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00.12)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey's spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews, and today I'm joined by my colleague, media reporter, Daniel Said. Hi Dani, how are you going today?

Daanyal Saeed (00:12.12)

Good to be with you, Crystal, as always.

Crystal Andrews (00:14.274)

For those who don't know, Darny and I run Crikey's newest daily column called The Snoop, which is a roundup of tips, news and absurdities from Australia and all around the world. So for today's episode of the podcast, we thought it might be fun to do a bit of a recap of the items from the past month that we found, you know, the most intriguing, the most outrageous, the most worthy of discussion. Are you ready to get stuck into some of the snoops from the past month, Darny?

Daanyal Saeed (00:42.606)

Absolutely, we're blasting back we've only been doing it for a month and we're we're already blasting back to the past. I'm looking forward to the story back.

Crystal Andrews (00:47.884)

I'll make sure the links to all of these stories are included in the episode description. So if you haven't seen the details already, you can go and check them out. but Darny, why don't you kick us off with one of your favorite items for the past month, which was, as I understand, a particularly juicy set of emails from within the National Anti Corruption Commission that was revealed by a freedom of information request.

Daanyal Saeed (01:08.002)

This FOI was really interesting, I think, to me, partially because of the politics around the National Anti-Corruption Commission and sort of the the process that we have gotten to to come here and what and and the body that we have here, the agency that we have now. and partially because it is a great insight into the minds of sort of

public sector bureaucrats and and how they view journalists. The Knack's response to, or internal response, after receiving questions from investigative journalist Nick Fake, who writes for Crikey, he's a regular contributor to Crikey. and he did a a piece for the point about sort of the failures of leadership and and and the commission's sort of lack of accountability and transparency, which is quite funny given the the the point of the agency. And obviously sort of the the political

scandals around what is now sort of outgoing Commissioner Paul Brereton and and Deputy Commissioner Kylie Kilgur. We see emails from Paul Brereton where he advises the acting media director, and I'm quoting here, given this journalist's c track record with us, I'd be inclined to not reply at all. And Kylie Kilgoa says she's listened to Nick Fake discussing the knack on the serious danger podcast, which is sort of a greens adjacent

podcast hosted by Emory Moon, who's an old candidate, an old Greens candidate, and Tom Ballard, who's a comedian and supporter of the Greens. and he she launches into this angry rebuttal of the quote, crap he intends to say about me. and the acting media director warns the editor of the point ahead of publication that the commission would protect the staff against, quote, defamatory claims made in the article, and that after the article was published.

quote despite best efforts to talk them out of it, an email is sent to the leadership of the NAC confirm that it they won't include it in their usual media roundup or a media briefing of mentions of the agency or mentions of their particular team or their work or or things that might be relevant to them. and it wouldn't be included in that so as to presumably not sort of further worsen the image of the NAC amongst its staff. Again.

Daanyal Saeed (03:27.928)

This is the the point of this agency was was transparency. The point of this agency was accountability. They used to say with teeth, an anti-corruption commission with teeth, one with accountability. And the one that they legislated A doesn't have any teeth. A lot of the sort of the mechanisms of of the NAC sort of and this is an argument that has has been prosecuted at some length in the public domain already. You know, it's not retrospective. There are lots of national security carve-outs, there are lots of quote unquote public interest carve, a lot of discretionary carve-outs. And so

It's a fundamentally flawed body and it's led by a fairly flawed director in Paul Brereton. There's a there's a grim, grim irony in that, I think. and so that's why I really liked this tip. It was a fantastic FOI. and a very rare, juicy, juicy, spicy FOI where you get some emotive language used by public servants on the public record. This was

Crystal Andrews (04:20.142)

Truly a fascinating email chain to read because I think the defensiveness of some of these very senior public servants, like Paul Brereton, which in his case, I think that probably might not surprise a lot of people who listen to this podcast around about this time. I think it was shortly after this FOI, the documents for this FOI were published, he appeared before the Senate Estimates Committee and and had that very touchy blow-up about whether or not he perceived his conduct to be.

subject to any conflict of interest rules. so perhaps the defensiveness of some of these people might not be totally, totally surprising. but it is really illustrative, I think, of how difficult it can be

for journalists who are sending in legitimate inquiries into public agencies, in this case tasked with very, very important role that

You see sort of the instance of quite detailed questions coming into the relevant inboxes within the NAC, getting pinged around to different people as they try to figure out, you know, how to respond to these questions. A whole host of sort of negotiating, reasoning, figuring out how we can provide a response to this journalist that we don't want to interact with at all. We you know, we don't want to actually answer these questions. We'll just give a statement and then we'll sort of quash it and move on.

and yeah, that point you mentioned about it it not even being shared in the the internal media roundup, the fact that they were trying to keep that negative coverage from other staff and other people in the NAC, I think is yeah, very, very telling and probably aligns with how a lot of people feel about that particular agency now as it stands today.

Daanyal Saeed (06:01.774)

probably bears repeating that Paul Breritan resigned from the commit as from the role of commissioner, right ahead of fronting estimates over this, because there was a whole lot of scrutiny over how he handled conflicts of interest. And then it came out earlier this month that the anti-corruption commission inspector said she was going to discontinue the investigations that were on foot in relation to Paul Breritan because he'd resigned.

Which again i i is this outrageous sort of precedent to set of okay, well, on the basis of someone resigning where there's no further scrutiny on potential sort of misuse, abuse of of public power, public positions, no sort of scrutiny gets done at all because he's resigned really underlines the importance of the journalism involved here. and so their d the defensiveness is really, really quite telling.

Crystal Andrews (06:58.542)

Speaking of fantastic freedom of information requests, turning up some juicy documents. One of the items from the past month that I really wanted to highlight was actually unearthed by FOI warrior Rex Patrick, who submitted some FOIs for our pals at indie media outlet Michael West Media. He made inquiries about South Australian premier Peter Malinauskis' diary. And what he turned up, I think.

I think is quite extraordinary. So the FOI request looked at a period of three months of calendar entries for the Premier's diary and revealed that the Premier had been having consistent meetings with Paul Starek, who is the editor at large of The Advertiser, which is the the major newspaper in Adelaide. It is a newscorp newspaper. And one of these meetings in that four-month period was an intimate dinner at Starek's home, which look

I I know that people might have some view of the relationships between journalists and politicians and, you know, obviously people maintaining sources, need access for stories, all that, all that kind of thing. That is quite an unusual calendar entry to be having dinner at the

home of a journalist like that. In the piece that Rex Patrick wrote for Michael West Media, he also sort of indicated that this number of consistent meetings.

I think he turned up a total of 33 meetings between the two of them overall, is also quite unusual. You know, it might be normal to have something in the diary where there is a key interview has been planned, a feature or some sort of like announcement or launch. Of course, you know, the advertiser has journalists, political journalists operating in their own right who are attending press conferences and and meeting with other politicians and having conversations and doing all of that other reporting. so for there to be such a close

relationship between a a senior editor like Starik and Malinowskis is certainly of note. He spoke to a source who said that Starik is the guy at the advertiser who gets the drops from the premiere. Malinowskis talks to Starik and the next day a story is published in a tone that is favorable to his source. Really good read that people should look at if they if they haven't already. Darny, what did you think about this when we when we ran the item in the snoop? The light

Daanyal Saeed (09:20.342)

Labour Party in particular has a really complex relationship with the News Corp Papers, right? and Labour politicians have a really complex relationship with the News Corp Papers because they have and and often rightly have been seen. Newscorp has as around the world been a cheerleader for conservative politics. The ABC did a wonderful documentary series on this, where the turn of phrase they use is that you need Rupert Murdoch's blessing if you want to be elected anywhere in the Western world, or

specifically in the Anglo Sphere of the UK, the US and Australia, you need Rupert Murdoch's blessing. and occasionally that blessing will be given to a Labour politician. And Tony Blair was seen on Hamilton Island the day before he was elected with Rupert Murdoch. Three or four years later, Kevin Rudd gets elected again with the blessing of the News Court papers. And then as far as Kevin Rudd's concerned, he's on the public record that he feels he was really, really hard done by the News Court papers throughout his prime ministership and after that.

such that he started Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission. He felt that it required sort of the full force, the investigative powers that are available to the Australian Parliament because Murdoch was such an undue influence on Australian politics. The reason I give you all this background is despite all of this, Anthony Albanese and the state premiers have really close relationships with the relevant Murdoch masters in their state. It is not uncommon to see Chris Mins.

sort of hanging out with Ben English, who's the editor of Daily Telegraph in New South Wales. It would not be weird to see Justin Tyrell the Victorian premiere around the editor of the Herald Sun, who's Sam Weir, or was Sam Weir. so that is really fascinating. The I think the interesting thing is they don't have the same level of closeness with competing masters. It's only with the Newscore papers, you know.

Chris Minnes isn't regularly hanging out with Bevan Shields and and you more recently, Jordan Baker. And you're not gonna see Jacinta Allen hanging out with like Patrick Elliott, who edits the age, right? There is a professional and respectful distance there that the News Court papers sort of dispose of and dispense with and say, no, actually the relationship between the politician and the paper is actually really important to have for our purposes and the politician as well.

Daanyal Saeed (11:34.986)

expects that. Adelaide's a little bit different because Adelaide is a one paper town. Adelaide and Brisbane are one paper towns and the the papers in question are Murdoch mastheads. So if you do want to have anything published in the the the biggest newspaper in town, you have to have a relationship with with in this case the editor of the advertiser. It's not just Paul Seric, it's it's Gemma Jones as well. This is what Peter Malinoskis, I'm sure, would say is that it's a practical decision.

because there is otherwise there is a there's a hodgepodge of media outlets, but there's none that are focused on Adelaide. This is an insight into what the reality of a politician's diary really is. When you see stories that are very clearly backgrounded in the papers and they don't have sources that are attributable to sort of opposition voices or whatever it might be, you can have a think about where that came from. And in this case, it, you know, they're often, particularly in one paper towns, they are direct from government.

Crystal Andrews (12:33.024)

Absolutely. It's the it's the classic drop situation. There's another aspect of this I thought worth pointing out. I do hear the point made in certain sort of circles that newspapers and particularly the Murdoch newspapers don't have the influence that they once had. Mm the major the vast majority of the publications that we're talking about are actually paywalled. You can only read the full articles if you're a subscriber. and people like to sort of point to this as an example of like the dwindling

Influence of the Murdoch Empire. I think this story showing how vital it still is to Peter Malinowskis to have a very close relationship with the editor at large of the South Australian newspaper actually is evidence to the contrary. This is something that I've said for a really long time. The Murdoch newspapers, in particular, do a really good job of getting the story that they would like to have encapsulated in a headline.

pushing that out on social media. It does, it, it no longer requires people to get beyond the pay ball to read the full article. That's the media media landscape that we're in at the moment. You can still do a lot of reputation management. You can still do a lot of image crafting. You can still reach millions and millions and millions of eyeballs with dwindling numbers actually going to the the actual, you know, dot com itself or or buying a newspaper itself and reading the article in full there. That's not to say that there aren't

you know, commercial problems with that media model. And and we won't get sidetracked into that discussion between the two of us because we could do that for a really long time. but I think this story does really illustrate, like if it is still so important for the premier of a state to have such a close relationship to the editor at large of a Murdoch newspaper with arguably declining readership, we should think about why that is and how else the message is getting out there. From there, let's talk about another media related

tip from the past month. this is one that I know really lights you up, Darnie. It's not just politicians and people in the media who have very close relationships with each other. It is people in the media and people in the media who have very close relationships with each other. Wouldn't you know?

Daanyal Saeed (14:45.224)

No, what we're getting at here, Crystal, is one of my favorite Snoops, Luca Levine, who is the newly announced CEO of women's media company Mama Mia, which was run, started by Mia Friedman. and this is one of the most successful media companies of the sort of the the early late 2000s, early 2010s. Mama Mia started the derogatory term used to be mommy blog.

In the sort of early 2010s. And now it is like genuinely, it is it is an Australian media powerhouse. It has outlasted a lot of its rivals in that space. It employs 150 people. It's one of the biggest podcasting juggernauts in Australia right now. It's an interesting massive operation. It's an enormous operation. And Mia Friedman is the head of it. This is she treats it as, and it is a family company. And so Jason Levine, her husband and co-founder, has been the CEO for like 17 years.

and now their son is going to be the CEO. Luca Levine, from every source that I've spoken to, is a perfectly competent worker. He's a very hard worker. And he gave an interview, a friendly interview to Mumbrella, which is a trade publication where he sort of tries to get ahead of the accusations of nepotism. Where he says, well, you can't just coast at Mamma Mia. I've I've worked very hard for this job. I've been here for 10 years. now bearing in mind he's 28 years old, so that is since he was 18.

And y you can't coast at mommy. I like, Yeah, it's a little easier to coast at a job when your mum's the boss.

Crystal Andrews (16:19.142)

It isn't totally fair for us to go all in on Luca Levine though, because this is far from an unusual in the instance in the media industry of nepotism, people with extensive family connections, powerful family connections, working with each other in the industry, sometimes at the same employers, sometimes at the same publications. and I think when you start to see the web of those connections, it it is quite startling.

this is a little bit of a tease, but Darny, you'll have a story coming up. It probably won't be out by the time this episode is out, but there is a story that you have been working on mapping just

how extensive these familial connections, what are we calling them? Media dynasties are in in the Australian media industry.

Daanyal Saeed (17:06.968)

He yes, I am. And in researching that piece, I quite literally I feel like the meme of the the crazy guy with all of his corkboards and his and his string, but you can quite literally mind map like a really significant chunk of the Australian media by who's married to who, whose kid is who, or whose besties who. And so you can go from like Luca Levine

To carry Packer in four steps that are not that far removed. And that can take you to Malcolm Turnbull, and that can take you to an entire another side of Australian politics. A lot of these you can trace back to one family. William Blake was a journalist at the Truth Newspaper at the turn of the tw of the 20th century. He had four children, all of whom worked in the media, some of whom were more prominent than others, but they were all journalists. So you had Peter, you had Patrick, you had Terry, and you had Julie. Now

Julie Finery, as she took as a made it as a married name, married Sean Feinery, who's a very well-known TV journalist. She also married before him a South African journalist named Gus Debrito. Gus Debrito, if you are in the Australian media, you will recognize the Debrito surname because Gus Debrito had two children who are very well known today. Sam Debrito was a well-known journalist and columnist and screenwriter, and he passed away in 2015.

his sister, Kate DeBruto, is currently the deputy editor of the Australian Financial Review. She's married to the executive editor of the nine newspapers, Luke Backlveen. So they literally work very closely together because of course the Financial Review is owned by Nine Entertainment. They have a child currently who works at news.com.au where they were both previously the editor-in-chief. so that's four generations of journalists. What's the degree of separation back to Carrie Packer? Well, Julie Flannery, her brother.

Patrick was once married or was married to a woman named Suzanne Blake, who's a very well-known CD publicist. Suzanne Blake was once engaged to a man named Trevor Kennedy, who was the former editor-in-chief of Consolidated Press Holdings, which is of course the Packer Empire, who was the managing director as well. And that takes us very neatly through to Carrie Packer himself. So there are like 10 people in this industry. It's it it really is extraordinary. This isn't to suggest that sort of there's anything untoward happening here.

Daanyal Saeed (19:22.05)

But it really does demonstrate just how insular the Australian media is. And I think that sort of bears interrogating. Lise Sayles, who is the long-term, or was the long-term host of 730. She hosts a very popular podcast with Annabelle Crab called Chat 10 Looks Three. and on the Facebook group for that, there was conversation about the Luca Levine story. And she said, We're not gonna have that. I'm not gonna have a bar of it. I know I've known Lucas since he a child, and I'm very good friends with Mia Friedman. I'm not gonna have it, I'm not gonna stand for it.

There are a million, I'm quoting her now, or paraphrasing her, there are a million male around businesses where their sons and daughters sort of get the top job and it goes barely remarked upon. I think that probably ignores the existence of the News Corp Dynasty, for example, or the fact that Mamma Mia presents itself in being this woman-led publication. I would say the group the group chats popped off the day that this announcement was made. one of the great a banner day.

for for Australian media industry group chats. but it does get people really fired up.

Crystal Andrews (20:24.64)

It really, it really was. And I think, you know, even Lee Sell's sort of roundabout comments where it was like, I'm gonna shut down the criticism in this Facebook group of Luca Levine because, you know, he's my friend's son, is kind of like the perfect encapsulation of of this whole conversation. Yeah, exactly. He's your friend's son. This is a discussion about nepotism. This is the discussion about the insularity of the industry. And, you know, I guess people

Are entitled to have different opinions about that, whether they think it's not a big deal, whether they think this is very, very serious. where I personally stand on it, I don't think having a very, very insular media industry, particularly when it comes to news media, is a good thing. I think we need a diversity of voices and views. You need people who have some distance and some remove to look at these very pressing issues. and I think also, you know, the the fact that people have taken this so seriously.

in some ways is a testament to what Mamma Mia is, the work that they can do. They are a publication that prides themselves on talking about women's issues. Again, whether people think they do a good job of that is a matter of opinion. but they certainly have the resources to do fantastic journalism on women's issues. Maybe they should see it as a compliment that people did get so riled up about making, you know, the son of the founder, the CEO, is perhaps an indication that people thought there could be better.

For this publication in this industry. Next up, if you'll indulge me in talking about an item from the column from my part of the world. For those who don't know, I'm based in Tasmania, in Hobart. It is beautiful, beautiful down here. but recently the Australian Electoral Commission published the new boundaries for the five federal electorates in Tasmania. They're about

27% of voters in Tasmania will move into a new seat. If you're watching this on video, we'll have a graphic. Apologies to those listening on the audio-on version. I'm gonna step through this as cleanly as possible. So most of the changes to the electorates have happened in the southern part of the state, around Hobart. The seat of Franklin is having its boundaries redrawn.

Crystal Andrews (22:35.426)

That is currently held by the Labour Minister Julie Collins. Franklin will gain some of the suburban areas of one of the neighboring regional seats of Lyons, but it will lose quite a few

suburbs actually to Andrew Wilkie's seat of Clark. So Andrew Wilkie has held the Cobart-based seat of Clark for quite some time on a very

very healthy margin. He's going to gain some from Franklin and he will also, in exchange, lose some of the suburbs that he currently represents. The interesting thing about Tasmania that other people from other parts of the country might not know is that the state electorates match the federal electorates. So the seat that you vote in federal elections are exactly the same for the state elections, of which there have been quite a few state elections in in the past couple of years.

Daanyal Saeed (23:23.016)

One of of many quirks of the Tasmanian electoral system.

Crystal Andrews (23:27.2)

It is certainly, it is a very lively and interesting political landscape down here. so the Tasmanian Electoral Commission has not formally announced that they're going to adopt these new AEC boundaries, but I think it's pretty expected that that will that will be the case. Now, election analyst Ben Rao, who also is a frequent Crikey contributor, he took a look at

The impact of these new boundaries and how they're going to shift things for the incumbents who are sitting in those seats for the most part. There's a very minimal impact to the incumbents in most of the seats, except for Clark, Andrew Wilkie's seat, which will see his very, very healthy margin from the previous federal election drop from 20% to about nine percent. So roughly halved. Obviously, that's not to suggest that, you know, if a federal election was going to be held

tomorrow that people would vote exactly the same ways they did in the last federal election. And, you know, that would that would necessarily guarantee Andrew Willowke lose that margin. He has said that he, you know, welcomes these new people into his seat and he looks forward to get getting to know them and addressing their needs. The other thing I wanted to note in conjunction with this story, which makes me laugh every time, Tony Abbott cat could not help but have his say about this. So kind of alongside the changing of the boundaries,

The AEC has also proposed a name change for the seat of Franklin. They're currently looking at naming the seats Tongolongata after an Aboriginal resistance warrior from this part of the country. Tony Abbott, as you can imagine, does not like that idea. He wrote a piece for his own Substack, which I believe was then republished by the Australian, where he proposed that the electorate of Truganini in the ACT.

Could actually be moved so that the the name Tragonini could be used for the seat of Franklin instead. Except, for those in the know, there is no electorate of Tragonini anywhere in the country, let alone the ACT. I have no idea where he came up with this. He was the prime minister of the country. You would think that he would be across it. It just seems to be pure invention by by Tony Abbott. And then, as I say,

Crystal Andrews (25:46.636)

republished by the Australian who either didn't fact check it or didn't know exactly what to do with that fact check. but I think that's just such a funny way to close out that item, Tony Abbott just inventing electorate that has never existed.

Daanyal Saeed (26:02.69)

When I first read this item, I didn't realise that Tragonini is also the basis for the name Tragonina, which is a suburb in Melbourne's West. so that's where I thought Tony Abbott might have been going with that. and that was that was his sort of intention there. I have no idea why he thought it might be well, why it might it might exist as a as a federal seat. And there's only two federal seats in the ACT anyway. so

Crystal Andrews (26:28.215)

Yeah, it's it's such a such a strange mistake.

Daanyal Saeed (26:33.314)

I don't know where he got that, but nonetheless I was very entertained by the apparent knowledge gaps by an ex PM.

Crystal Andrews (26:40.622)

Danny, I think we have time to squeeze in just one more really quick one. I'll I'll I'll leave it up to you. What was your final favorite tip?

Daanyal Saeed (26:50.766)

So this one got, this was in our very, this is our very first lead tip. And it was about Fremantle MP Josh Wilson. Josh Wilson is a very keen soccer player and he plays over 45's Saturday sport for his club, Fremantle City, in his seat of of Fremantle in in WA. And a tipster got in touch with us to inform us that he had

struck another player in the face. I went diving down the the tribunal listings at Football West, which is the governing body for for football and WA, and there he was, Josh Wilson suspended for five games and given a red card for what that's an equivalent sanction in the rules and regulations to striking someone in the face. The sum total of his response to the press he says, I I said sorry and I had a beer with him afterwards.

but he sort of dismissed it as Rajibanji. And his staff tried to play that down and gave me a similar line when I got in contact for the first time. And I had to be like a with the greatest of respect, I used to be a sports report. Five weeks is a long time. five weeks is a pretty hectic penalty at community level.

Crystal Andrews (27:58.89)

A good reminder also that we take tips if you've seen something, heard something, if you know something that you think Crikey should investigate further, you can always get in contact with us. I will make sure that all of the secure methods of contacting us are in the episode

description. So if you have something you'd like us to know, please check those out. for now, Darnie, I think we'll leave this here. We've got to get back to Snooping, but thanks for taking the time to chat about these very interesting stories for me today.

Daanyal Saeed (28:28.342)

Always a pleasure, Crystal. Thank you.

Crystal Andrews (28:30.604)

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