

REVIEWS

The sacking of an editor

How the editor of the *New Zealand Listener* was dismissed after a row with the board

Commentary: On 25 July 1972, the Board of the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation decided to terminate the editorship of Alexander MacLeod with three months' pay, effective immediately. *The Listener* had only had three editors since its launch as a broadcasting guide in 1939. Its founder, Oliver Duff, and his successor Monty Holcroft, the revered editor of 18 years, built it up as a magazine of culture, arts and current events on top of its monopoly of listings of radio and television programmes. Both men managed to establish a sturdy independence for the magazine which was still the official journal of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, later to become the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation. So, the dismissal of the editor was a sizable event. The National government of the day in New Zealand ordered a Commission of Inquiry into whether the sacking was above board and whether it was politically influenced. This article is the story of the commission's findings.

Keywords: editorials, journalism, magazines, media freedom, New Zealand, NZBC, NZ Listener

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Radio New Zealand

FIVE years ago, when I left *The New Zealand Herald* after 15 years employment, I decided I would leave carrying my belongings packed in a brown cardboard box. It is not quite as odd as it sounds now. One of the most common images after the Global Financial Crisis was employees leaving the office with their belongings packed in a distinctive box. You can search it now. Enron? There are the employees leaving with cardboard boxes. Lehman Brothers? The same cardboard box. Freddie Mac

and Fannie Mae? Same thing. Every time I looked at press agency photos of people leaving work, I looked for the cardboard box.

So, when I left the *Herald* for another job in 2015, I bought myself the cardboard box and packed up my few things. I said goodbye to colleagues, had a drink or two and then picked up the box, took it home and stored it in the attic.

Some years later, I found it. It didn't look how I remembered. On the outside was written in felt pen, 'Library, bin'.

'The Listener' incident

For the first time in 33 years the "Listener" appears this week without an editorial. The hiatus, a result of events with which everybody is familiar, will be temporary. An editorial will be published as usual next week, and regularly thereafter. Meanwhile a flood of letters has been received on the future of the editorial and on the dismissal of the Editor, Mr Alexander MacLeod. The selection printed here represents as faithfully as possible the range of opinion and protest.

Sir,—I wish to express dismay at the report of Alexander MacLeod's dismissal. Although a subscriber for some 20 years I cannot recall a term of editorship, other than his own, during which I have consistently read the editorial in full first before turning to other sections of the paper.

New Zealand needs informed
opinion: it does not



Figure 1: Letters of protest over the dismissal of *Listener* editor Alexander MacLeod and the end of editorials, including from historian and journalist Michael King.

I had picked up the wrong one. Inside were dozens of unwanted and browning reports from the 1960s and 1970s. My box was long gone to the landfill. I had the reports even the *Herald* Library didn't want.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, I climbed into the attic to toss it out. But, curious and with a bit of time to kill, I decided to pick one report to see if it was interesting. I picked out *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Dismissal of the Editor of the New Zealand Listener* (1972).

On 25 July 1972, the Board of the New Zealand Broadcasting Cor-

poration decided to terminate the editorship of Alexander MacLeod, with three months' pay, effective immediately. *The Listener* had only had three editors since its launch as a broadcasting guide in 1939. Its founder Oliver Duff and successor Monty Holcroft, the revered editor of 18 years, built it up as a magazine of culture, arts and current events on top of its monopoly of listings of radio and television programmes. Both men managed to establish a sturdy independence for the magazine which was still the official journal of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, later to become the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation.

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Straight away, news reports raised the possibility of political interference.

The year 1972 was a turbulent one. It was the year of Nixon in China and anti-Vietnam War protests. In New Zealand, the Holyoake years were ending, the electorate tired of National after 12 years; there were protests about the impending 1973 Springbok tour. On all these issues, MacLeod was a liberal. His editorials would later be characterised as ‘idealistic liberalism’.

Some of his editorials worried the Board. They thought they lacked ‘balance’.

By all accounts, MacLeod was a good journalist, but *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (n.d.) describes him as ‘erratic’. He had been recruited from England to replace Holcroft and immediately increased *The Listener’s* foreign coverage. Witnesses praised his literary ability. He took his weekly editorial very seriously as a public figure.

At the same time, the Board had been warned of some troubling dealings with staff. The Public Service Association forwarded staff complaints about him. There was a falling out with a ‘sub-editor in Auckland’. In another incident, MacLeod objected to the choice of the ‘Listener Appointments Committee’ (one of three *Listener* committees cited in the report) of a new ‘Listener Secretary/Typiste’. He threatened to give her no work if she was hired. She didn’t stay long.

Into this volatile mix was thrown a magazine redesign. The ‘Listener Sales Committee’ (another committee)

wanted change to arrest circulation declines, maybe even a change of direction. It had discussed the possibility of running a little less culture and current events and a bit more entertainment and listings, like the BBC’s *Radio Times*. It proposed a ‘popular magazine of good quality and not subject to criticism over controversial editorials’. Did it really need an editorial? The Board said it would consider it.

In early July, the NZBC Board formally asked its editor for his thoughts on the editorials. It invited him to the meeting of July 25 to discuss the matter.

The result was unexpected and fateful.

A week before the meeting, MacLeod sent the Board a letter. Ostensibly setting out his views on editorials, it is an oddly rambling missive, setting out a series of complaints, among them that the Director-General of Broadcasting had not acted properly, according to the *Listener Staff Manual* in a staff dispute.

MacLeod goes on to say that he does not wish to speak to the Board about editorials; he only wants to be heard if the Board decides to drop them. The later commission report pointed out it was not quite clear if he was coming to the July 25 meeting or not.

Certainly, the Board thought he was. It was one of the first items of business. The Board duly convened at 11am, on the floor above the *Listener* editor’s office.

At 11.20 am, the Board’s secretary rang MacLeod’s secretary and asked

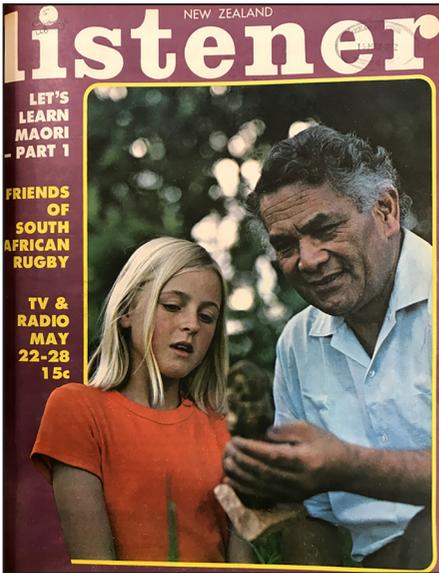


Figure 2: A *Listener* cover during the final year of Alexander MacLeod's editorship.

that he come up. The editor rang back to say he was busy. He said he had indicated he couldn't come. At 11.35 am, the chairman asked the secretary to ring again. He got through and asked him to come up. MacLeod again said no. He had had no notice of the meeting, he had no wish to speak, he couldn't leave his desk as *The Listener* was going to press in two hours. At 11.45 am, the editor wrote a note to the chairman. 'I am short of staff and my presence here is absolutely required. No disrespect is intended, it is merely for professional reasons I cannot leave.' He went on to say that he had had his say in his letter and only needed to talk to the board if it 'did certain things'.

At 12.55 pm the Board wrote a note to the editor directing him to come at 2.30 pm. MacLeod did not see it at first; he had gone to a lunch

meeting of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs to hear the speaker. When he found it, he wrote another letter to the Board upstairs. 'I regret that for reasons I have already explained—namely that this is a press day and my chief sub-editor and chief reporter are both absent—it will not be possible to attend.'

(The chief subeditor gave evidence to the commission that the editor had given him the rest of the day off and said he could handle the magazine himself.)

At 2.50 pm, the Board secretary rang the editor and, in effect, told him to get up to the board now. The secretary said he told the editor to 'drop everything' and 'come right up'. In the language of the commission he was told that the direction to attend was 'absolute and unqualified'. MacLeod replied, he couldn't right now but he could come at 4pm.

At some point in all these to-ings and fro-ings, Mrs MacLeod came to the office for two hours and she and her husband phoned their lawyers.

By mid-afternoon, the Board had had enough.

At that point the Board passed a motion: 'the employment of Mr A J MacLeod, editor, *New Zealand Listener*, be terminated on three months' notice.'

And it resolved he be relieved of his duties forthwith.

Into this fraught moment, dropped one last letter from MacLeod downstairs. He said his editorial duties should have passed by 4pm: 'This is

to confirm my availability.’

Such a dramatic action was always going to make headlines and raise questions. A few weeks later, the National government of ‘Gentleman Jack’ Marshall ordered a Commission of Inquiry under Ernest Albert Lee, OBE, a retired Christchurch judge, perhaps best known for his work in getting the Totalisator Agency Board (TAB) established. He was to determine if the Board had acted properly and if was there any political interference.

One by one, the Board members gave evidence to the inquiry that they had lost confidence in MacLeod. In different ways, they felt he was challenging their authority and had to go. One felt that there would only be ‘chaos’ if officers could ignore the Board.

MacLeod’s lawyers claimed the editor’s letters and notes to the Board were at all times respectful. And anyway, they asked, why couldn’t the Director-General of Broadcasting, who was at the meeting, just walk downstairs and talk to MacLeod, rather than summoning him repeatedly?

Commissioner Lee found that the editor’s behaviour was ‘completely inexcusable’.

‘He obviously had made up his mind.... he would go in his own time.’

Lee found that MacLeod had enough time to go to a lunch meeting, have his wife in the office for two hours, write notes to the Board, ring his solicitor and give his chief sub half a day off, but couldn’t walk up the stairs to talk about editorials.

‘It seems to me that it was not the

editor’s privilege to decide if he would go or not.’ And as for the Board going down to see the editor, there was no reason at all for them to ‘go cap-in-hand’ to an employee.

But was the Board influenced by politics?

Commissioner Lee was attracted to the somewhat tortured argument that the Board could not have been political because if it was, it wouldn’t have done something as stupid as sacking a liberal editor just months before the 1972 General Election.

Interestingly, he does provide a snapshot of the political affiliations of the NZBC Board.

First up its chair, Major-General Walter McKinnon, who had just retired as the NZ Military’s Chief of General Staff. He was also the father of the McKinnon siblings who have been prominent in politics, diplomacy and public life. Don McKinnon was the Deputy Prime Minister under Jim Bolger and a former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

Commissioner Lee finds that the chairman bent over backwards on July 25 to ask the editor to attend but as to politics, he had little interest. ‘He made a small annual payment to an electorate branch of the National Party but had never participated in any political activity.’

Another member, Mrs McNab had been active for National for 20 years and was a Dominion Councillor. Melville Tronson had been a National Party member for ‘8 or 9’ years and had once been asked to be a candidate

but declined. B E Brill was a National Dominion Councillor and became the National MP for Kapiti as Barry Brill. Set against that was James Collins who was non-political; his interest lay in sales marketing. The inquiry report drily points out that Collins had made just one reference to *The Listener* in his time on the Board, when he had suggested it explore every avenue to get more radio ads. 'That was the sole reference he ever made to *The Listener*.'

Lastly, Reverend K Ihaka had once been asked to stand for Labour in Northern Māori but said no and pointed out that he dealt with all sorts of people from different parties. So, was the decision to sack the editor political? Definitely not, concludes Commissioner Lee. His investigation finds the Board felt it was dealing with a turbulent editor, who was challenging their authority by refusing to appear. He finds no direct evidence of interference. But it's hard not to escape MacLeod's counter-argument in the commission report. The Board may have acted with no political intent, but the editor believed his job was becoming politicised. MacLeod's view seems to have been that great issues of war, racism and politics were being debated in the country and *The New Zealand Listener* had to be in the centre of them. The Board said it never interfered in *Listener* editorials, but it had also become concerned about 'balance'. At least part of the problem seems to have stemmed from the government ownership of a magazine which dealt with current affairs. Throughout the

commission, board members question how *The Listener* sat within the 1961 *Broadcasting Act* which demanded equitable, balanced reporting on radio and television. They were often exercised how their magazine could have opinionated editorials when radio and TV didn't.

A year earlier, the 'Listener Committee' (the third committee of *The Listener* mentioned to the inquiry) wrote a report to MacLeod saying *The Listener* had to maintain balance 'along the same lines as the corporation is required by statute to follow in its broadcast programmes'.

And just a month before the July board meeting, the Listener Committee had met (along with MacLeod) to discuss ways to make the paper more popular and to criticise 'the controversial character of editorials'—it not being a broadcasting function to 'express any particular point of view'. MacLeod said he remembered being told by a Board member his editorials were 'politically embarrassing' to the NZBC. Board members told the inquiry they could recall conversations about some of MacLeod's editorials. General McKinnon remembered phoning MacLeod to offer information about the Vietnam War for which the editor, he said, was 'grateful'. MacLeod, on the other hand, claimed McKinnon rang him after every anti-Vietnam War editorial, I 'have no hesitation in saying... pressures were exerted'. MacLeod remembered every discussion of an editorial; General McKinnon felt they were hardly discussed by the Board at all.

Things weren't helped by a cover story on the impending Springbok tour showing some All Blacks with the headline, 'No tour'. MacLeod said the Director-General of Broadcasting objected to it as 'politically slanted journalism'. Furthermore, MacLeod had angered the NZBC by suggesting in an editorial it had caved in to political pressure to 'balance' a news report on losses in Vietnam. His editorial was thought disloyal to colleagues in the NZBC.

All of this came at a sensitive time when the government was discussing whether to allow a second TV channel.

Perhaps, a different man may have handled all this differently. In his writings presented to the Commission of Inquiry, MacLeod comes across as a prickly and difficult cove. And the pressure seems to have crystallised in his mind around his editorial freedom. Commissioner Lee rather harshly calls it his 'blind jealousy of his editorial role'. So how independent could an editor be, especially the editor of a publicly funded magazine? The commission sought several views. One of its oddities is that MacLeod seemed to find his greatest support from experts outside the media, particularly a Victoria University business professor with the wonderful name of Stewart Wilfred Nivison Ransom. His argument appears to be that editors are likely to be single-minded, ambitious and aggressive, so harmonious relations with boards are unlikely. If there was conflict with the Broadcasting Act then maybe the Act should be changed—or ignored. At this point, Commissioner Lee grants

Ransom his own exclamation mark of disapproval, the only one in the report! Much more to his liking was the evidence of former *New Zealand Herald* editor, Orton Sutherland Hintz. He quotes him approvingly at length (although with a Christchurch judge's knowledge of the media north of the Waimakariri he refers to Hintz's paper as the 'Auckland Herald'). Hintz argued that editorial independence is not absolute, that it is set by the direction of the proprietor or the Board. And that editorials are not the view of the editor alone; they represent the view of the journal. In other words, the editor and an editorial are subject to the Board's policies. If an editor received a directive from the Board, they had three options; put it into effect, resign, or refuse and be dismissed. Hintz was firm; the Board had the absolute right to keep an eye on the content of *The Listener*.

He did not believe the number of times the Board sought to speak to MacLeod about his editorials was excessive.

The Commissioner's verdict

In the end, the Commission of Inquiry found completely in favour of the Board.

Sitting on a box in my attic marked 'Library. Bin', I read the conclusions. They have the rhythm of a tumbril drumbeat.

Did the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation act properly in dismissing Alexander Joseph MacLeod as editor? The answer, said Commissioner Lee, was Yes.

Was any political interference or

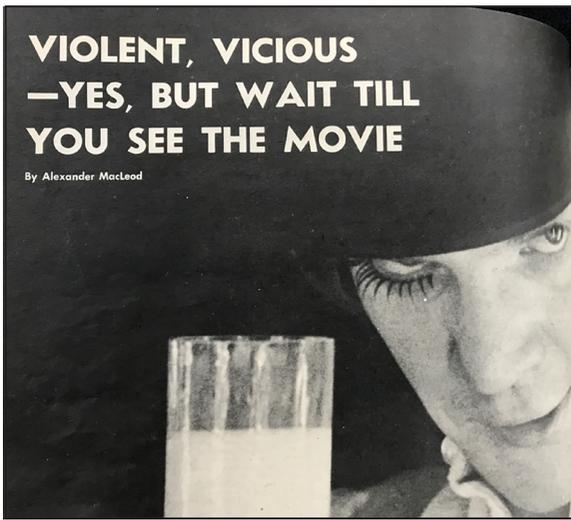


Figure 3: A *Listener* article by editor Alexander MacLeod in 1972. His editorials often highlighted issues such as foreign affairs, the Vietnam War and the campaign for a nuclear-free New Zealand.

influence brought to bear on the corporation in making its decision? The answer was No.

Was the corporation influenced by any political consideration? The answer again No.

The report was delivered to His Excellency Sir Edward Denis Blundell, Knight Grand Cross of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint Gorge, Knight Commander of the most Excellent Order of the British Empire, Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief in and over New Zealand on the 13th day of October 1972. And that was largely that. The country was in the midst of an election; six weeks later National's long reign was ended by Norman Kirk's Labour. Within a few months Kirk withdrew New Zealand troops from Vietnam, recognised China and ended the pro-

posed 1973 Springbok tour.

Some 48 years later, reading a brown cardboard box of old reports, I haven't been able to get one image out of my head. It's like a film shot of a building with the outer wall removed to show the floors. On one floor, the Board of the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation. One floor below, an editor, joined occasionally by his wife, putting *The Listener* to bed and steadfastly refusing to walk upstairs to defend editorials.

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