
Reviews

DAVID MARR is an Australian author and journalist who has been a reporter with *Four Corners* and the host of *Media Watch*.

The politics of a meddler's news empire

Rupert Murdoch: An Investigation of Political Power, by David McKnight.
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AUSTRALIAN journalists have a sad history of going off to Washington to be ruined. They leave home the hope of the side but after a visit to the boiler room and a peek into the furnace they return enthralled by American ambitions and dream of becoming players in its games of power. Rupert Murdoch was one of these. Visiting Washington in 1972, the young tycoon fell under the spell of Richard Nixon and was never the same again.

The flip-flops ended. He had once sung Fidel Castro's praises, cultivated crusty old Arthur Calwell and used his new national broadsheet, *The Australian*, to demand 'Black Jack'

RUPERT MURDOCH

AN INVESTIGATION OF POLITICAL POWER

DAVID MCKNIGHT



McEwan succeed the drowned Harold Holt. Crazy stuff. He had swung his UK titles behind Labour and his Australian papers behind the rising Gough Whitlam. Then he went to Washington and turned hard right. Nixon—and later Ronald Reagan, Murdoch's enduring love—gave him the politics he has pursued and the rhetoric he has used ever since.

It has been a long, colourful and often whacky ride, not least for News Corporation. Murdoch has freely spent its blood and treasure for the best part of 40 years on his political causes. 'He was and still is a frustrated politician,' wrote John Menadue, who

served both Whitlam and the News chief. 'He can't leave politics alone.'

So many have been down this track before that I wondered, at first, if we needed another book on the last great media mogul. But David McKnight has done something in *Rupert Murdoch: An Investigation of Political Power* that's now impossible for all but dedicated Murdoch watchers: he has winnowed the immense pile of material on the machinations of 'the most famous Australian in the world' to produce a concise and tough account of how and why Murdoch has become a force in world politics.

Murdoch doesn't emerge as an original political thinker. His originality lies elsewhere in fields that don't much interest McKnight: in his fearless risk-taking and genius as a tabloid newspaperman. By contrast, the man's political vision is banal.

The crusades and bullying, the shit-lists and huckstering, the character assassinations and backroom deals, the endless investment in unprofitable newspapers in Australia, the UK and the US all have the seamless purpose of making money, entrenching the Republican Party in America and exporting its vision to the rest of the English-speaking world.

From the Republicans comes his empire's rhetoric about 'liberal elites' blocking the way for decent men

and women everywhere. From the Republicans comes an exaggerated fear of communism that lingers still in corners of News Corp. But above all from the Republicans comes a ceaseless hostility to initiatives that might cost rich taxpayers money. The evil on that front—an evil 'found lurking everywhere—is the left.

McKnight writes: 'For Murdoch, politics is equally as important as business. Being a political insider and an activist is supremely important to his personality and his outlook.' Journalism can come in a poor third. It is shocking to be reminded by McKnight of the media mogul's response to Watergate: he backed Nixon and deplored the efforts of Woodward and Bernstein.

'The American press might get their pleasure in successfully crucifying Nixon,' Murdoch told a friend back then. 'But the last laugh would be on them. See how they like it when the commies take over the West.'

So many civilised outcomes have been achieved—or not—in the face of News Corp's enthusiasms. Murdoch's papers and television stations rarely speak with one voice and cannot dictate outcomes. But if in the US, the UK or Australia you want to change drug laws, tax the rich effectively, give the poor health care, hold the US to account for its military exploits,

cool the globe or extend human rights, you have to deal with News Corporation.

Old campaigns of the Murdoch empire seem scarcely credible now. The *New York Post* ran a brutal crusade against gay rights in America as late as the 1980s with the editor Steve Dunleavy ordering a troubled reporter to write that AIDS could be transmitted by kissing: ‘Let’s not be too technical mate—it’s a good yarn.’

In London, meanwhile, *The Sunday Times* was questioning the scientific consensus that HIV causes AIDS—questioning science has a proud history in News—and blaming the problem on poofs. Only junkies, gays, bisexuals and victims of tainted blood transfusions could contract AIDS, the paper suggested in 1989. ‘Anything else is homosexual propaganda.’

McKnight does not hold Murdoch to account for every adventure News Corp has pursued over the years. But he marshals with fresh clarity the evidence that Murdoch’s empire is peculiarly attuned to its proprietor’s whims. David Yelland of the *Sun* confessed: ‘Most Murdoch editors wake up in the morning, switch on the radio, hear that something has happened and think, “What would Rupert think about this?”’

He lets them know, of course. He rings and asks the question that

haunts any good editor anywhere: ‘What have we got?’ He has a long record of firing fine editors who don’t toe his line, and of finding fine editors who will. He gives interviews. He delivers speeches like the 2008 Boyer Lectures extolling his Reaganite wisdom. Those lectures, McKnight tells us, were largely written by a former speechwriter for George W Bush.

And then there’s the money and the editorial platforms Murdoch gives to ultra-conservative think tanks and odd figures in the shadowy world McKnight has long explored: the anti-communist diaspora of the CIA and MI5. A lot of Murdoch’s own money plus about \$30 million of News Limited’s cash has gone into neocon Bill Kristol’s Project for the Republican Future and its spin-off magazine, the *Weekly Standard*.

Anger is not McKnight’s forte. Deep research, vivid quotation and plain storytelling are his strengths. But when it comes to the Iraq War, McKnight allows a little anger to show. He accuses News Corp of having blood on its hands for promoting neocons such as Kristol, failing to interrogate the ‘evidence’ against Saddam and mobilising every paper in its world empire to justify the invasion: ‘The result was over 100,000 dead.’

I used to argue that Murdoch only

backs winners. McKnight dismisses this view as glib and cites Murdoch's implacable opposition to Bill Clinton. I take the point, but in partial defence of my old view I would advance this: the structures of American politics don't allow Murdoch to put Fox and the *New York Post* into play. Murdoch in America is implacably Republican.

But in Britain and Australia where party allegiances are more fluid he can sniff the wind and do adventurous deals. The mandate of Murdoch can shift. He is a dyed-in-the-wool Reaganite who can present himself convincingly in London and Canberra as a Labour/Labor kingmaker. It is ruthless but it is very grown up.

However, none of the dark stuff would work unless Murdoch ran hugely popular newspapers and television stations. I don't think McKnight gives due weight to this fundamental source of the old man's power. Murdoch's political leverage depends on his uncanny talent for winning and holding the attention of very large numbers of people.

Without that, politicians would have nothing to fear and nothing to gain from dealing with him. He would not be at their tables. They need not run down to Cavan for dinner or fly to Hamilton Island to confer with the great man. He would not be slipping in and out the back door of Number 10.

That is why it is too soon to write him off. In post-Hackgate Britain, at least Murdoch's power to get his way by bullying is dramatically diminished. Politicians on all sides, fed up with appeasing the man for so many years, have formed an alliance against him. But it is Murdoch the political meddler they are trying to shake off their backs, not Murdoch the grubby newspaperman.

While News Corp continues to amass audiences around the world, politicians will have to deal with the company and its proprietor. And unless he is toppled by his own shareholders Murdoch will continue to have almost endless resources to pursue his 40-year passion to reshape the English-speaking world to fit the template of conservative America. He is old and he is wounded, but he ain't down and out.

The big question hanging over the media right now is whether newspapers will still be around in half a dozen years. Another not quite so far-reaching but nevertheless fascinating question is raised on nearly every page of David McKnight's book: How might our world change when Rupert is no longer at the helm and News Corp can focus its energies on reporting the news and delivering profits to its shareholders?

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