

The Narcissists, the Nefarious and the Ne'er Do Wells

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As an investigative journalist, I have two favourite quotes that bookend my professional life.

The first is by Ben Bradlee, the legendary editor of *The Washington Post* during the Watergate days.

At the time *The Washington Post* was under a great deal of pressure as they chipped away at the Watergate scandal. The Nixon administration was crying foul and accusing the *Post* of all manner of media beat-ups.

It is eerily similar to the claims of “fake news” that that Trump administration is levelling against *The New York Times* and the *Post*.

Of the Watergate coverage, Ben Bradlee said this: “Our business is not to be loved but to go after the truth”.

My second is from the famous British editor and foreign correspondent, Max Hastings.

Hastings recalls that he was a fresh-faced reporter when an older hand gave him some invaluable advice about politicians: "Never forget that they lie, they lie, they lie."

Only last week I received a call from a detective at Katoomba police station.

In September last year a diary found its way to me. The owner had been to a boozy lunch and left it behind at a restaurant in the Blue Mountains where it remained for some months until a member of staff had a look at it and realised it was something I might be interested in.

The inscription on the opening page read: "TOUGH TIMES DON'T LAST TOUGH PEOPLE DO."

Unfortunately, the man who penned these motivational words is the former hardman of the Labor Left, Ian Macdonald, who is currently in Junee jail serving a seven-year stretch for corruption.

He was jailed in June last year after a jury found that the former mining minister was guilty of misconduct in public office for gifting, without tender I might add, a lucrative coal mine to a union mate, John Maitland.

It appears that Ian Macdonald and his wife Anita hate me with a passion and have been urging police to have me charged with “goods in custody” over the momentary possession of the diary which I returned after publication.

They also told the police that I had driven to Katoomba, broken into their house and stolen the diary. Not only that, but they accused me of adding in entries myself.

The diary contained a dizzying array of proposed business deals which ranged from the export of bull pizzles (that's penises for the uninitiated) to using his contacts in China for investments in faecal microbiota transplantation, better known as pooh transplants.

Macdonald had also penned some quaint musings such as "Greenies are only good for target practice".

It never ceases to amaze me how narcissistic politicians can be and how easily they lie. Not only do they tell whoppers but how their default position is to blame someone else for their woes.

People often ask me about the secret of investigative journalism. There is no secret.

All journalism should use the same tools – curiosity, scepticism, the desire to uncover the truth.

Daily journalism is largely reactive, that is, reporting and explaining the news as it happens.

Investigative journalism looks beyond the daily news in an attempt to draw attention to the failures within our institutions; to scrutinise the actions of those in authority or to expose the unpleasant practices of large corporations.

Sometimes this comes at a price. Due to those ne'er do wells I write about I have had to move out of my home; we have had to hire security guards.

Only recently, I was informed that an underworld figure I had been writing about was trying to find out where I lived. That very same day I was sent a text with a photo of my car and its number plate.

I have continued to write about that person.

We owe it to our readers to not give into threats. I see it as a form of bullying.

Having said that, the person who is the biggest danger to me of course is myself. My children are constantly in stitches at my ineptitude when it comes to electronic devices.

I once posted a tweet full of random letters. My phone was in my pocket and I didn't realise this gibberish had been made public. A member of the public thought I had been kidnapped and I was sending a coded cry for assistance.

And I still don't know how I keep inadvertently sending text messages with a map with a red pin identifying my current location. I accidentally sent a map of my location to Felix Lyle the then boss of the Hells Angels and another one to Chris Mitchell, then editor in chief of *The Australian*.

It is also important never to take yourself too seriously. On Monday and Tuesday of last week, I had a two-part series on money laundering, drugs and the alleged fraud involving missing millions from the Australian Tax Office.

I had worked on these stories for weeks.

The ABC rang me on Wednesday wanting to do an interview. I had to laugh; it wasn't about any of my recent investigative efforts – no it was about a cat rescue! On Wednesday morning I was out walking the dogs when I saw a group of police trying to rescue a cat which was at the top of a tree. Dressed in white overalls with "Police Rescue" emblazoned across her back and a loaded glock strapped to her thigh, one of the rescuers was up a ladder with a pole trying unsuccessfully to coax the cat down.

I posted the photo on twitter. It was this which had caught the ABC's imagination.

But feline follis aside, corruption flourishes in society when journalists lack the nerve to shine a light on matters the rich and powerful want to keep secret.

Of course, this is easier said than done. I have seen firsthand what can happen to journalists when they dare to challenge corrupt politicians and it isn't pretty.

I first tried to expose one corrupt politician Eddie Obeid in 1999 when he was attempting to use his position as an MP to get the Olympic flagpole contract for his sons.

For years I wrote about him – his failure to declare business interests.

I did stories ranging from stacking elections in his hometown in Lebanon, to his monumental bad luck with fires.

My favourite though was not actually a fire but a near miss. The Obeids had a function and wedding reception venue called The Bellevue, which was struggling.

Beneath the reception centre was a tobacconist who called the police when he noticed petrol dripping through the ceiling. Obeid later claimed that the attempted petrol bombing was due to rivalry over a Lebanese beauty contest which had been held at The Bellevue earlier in the week.

Life is full of serendipity.

It was March 2012 and as he sat in the witness box contemplating which lie to tell, Moses Obeid could not have known that his choice would bring down the Obeid empire.

Moses and his company Streetscape had been ordered to pay more than \$12 million to the City of Sydney after he was caught cheating the council's ratepayers out of royalty payments by secretly selling the council's multi-function street poles in the Middle East.

Moses Obeid had no intention of paying and he told the court he had no money. The only problem was that in order to obtain a home loan, Moses Obeid had declared to the bank he had assets worth \$11 million.

Among those assets, Moses declared he had a \$700,000 interest in cafes at Circular Quay.

For years, *The Sydney Morning Herald* had been trying to prove that the Obeids secretly owned three cafe leases at Circular Quay and that Eddie Obeid had been lobbying his colleagues for favourable treatment without disclosing he and his family stood to benefit.

And now here was the proof.

I had come the full circle with the Obeids – my first story was about the flagpoles and it was those same flagpoles which had brought them undone.

Eddie Obeid is currently in jail because of those cafes at Circular Quay.

Over the years Obeid said all manner of things about me in parliament.

“McClymont has been mixing with scum for so long that she no longer knows who is good and who is bad, what is real and what is made up. She has become the journalistic equivalent of a gun moll with glittering associations with the not so well to do.”

But it is our job to bring to light the things that those in power don't want the public to see. Whether we like it or not, investigative journalism creates enemies and they are often very powerful enemies.

Paul Keating was never a fan after I wrote about the infamous sale of his share in a piggery to Indonesians. He once wrote a letter to the *Herald* saying: “Is this woman a stalker, or is she just under-employed? Will we find her next sniffing bicycle seats in nearby Darling Harbour?”.

The late author and speechwriter Bob Ellis once wrote: “Kate McClymont ruined my life and I do not like her. She is going after Craig Thomson lately and she had better watch it.”

Jockey Jim Cassidy was banned from racing following my story on the infamous jockey tapes scandal. His reaction was to spit on my back, well given his size, the back of my knees, saying: “You fucking bitch, you've ruined my life”.

And those nefarious types can be very persuasive when they don't want something in the paper.

I was at the Downing Centre Court to cover the sentencing of Jamie Vincent, one of the notorious Vincent crime family. Their family motto should be: We do the Crime together. We do the Time together.

At one time the entire clan - Jamie's dad Tony and his two brothers - were all in jail together for supplying drugs, possessing illegal firearms and the like.

Anyway, Jamie Vincent arrived, 100 kgs of muscle, a bullet head, leather jacket and dark glasses. I mentioned to our photographer that the Vincents were not particularly nice people and that they had been accused of murdering their mate Max Gibson.

Having painted a not particularly flattering picture of Jamie Vincent and warning the photographer not to get too close, I blithely headed off to get a coffee. I returned to find the photographer ashen-faced and shaking.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Jamie Vincent had come over to the photographer and, leaning within inches of his face, said: "If you publish any photos of me, I will come after you, I will track you down and I will get you."

"Listen mate, I am just doing my job. Don't shoot the messenger," said our photographer.

"But I will shoot the messenger," said Vincent.

At this point I marched over to old bullet-head who was waiting to go through the court's security system.

"How dare you threaten my photographer!" I snapped.

Of course, Vincent denied that he had done any such thing.

I said, "Well, there are plenty of witnesses who heard you threaten him."

"Listen, you stinking ugly old hag why don't you piss off!" snarled Vincent.

I was momentarily speechless. "Ugly, old hag" - well, I may have seen better days - but to be smelly!

The next day we ran Jamie Vincent's photo (without the photographer's byline) and I included his threats to the photographer in the story. The best way to deal with bullies is to show them up as the thugs they really are.

I love the Vincents: Father Teflon Tony ran the family's criminal enterprise from his classy headquarters, Lady Jane's lap-dancing parlour, which was conveniently located across the road from the *Herald's* then office in Market St in the city.

Then there is Tony Vincent's other son Tony junior. Tony junior and his best mate Max Gibson have been described as 'the dumb and dumber' of the criminal world. On a late summer afternoon in 1997, Woollahra was rocked by a huge explosion in Tara Street.

Drinkers at the nearby Lord Dudley Hotel were astonished to see a man rushing by with half his buttock blown off. Neighbours in Tara Street rushed out of their houses to aid the other man, Tony junior, who was badly injured and wearing only one shoe.

Police were later able to follow the trail of blood from the Lord Dudley back to the scene of the crime, where they not only found the remainder of Max Gibson's bum cheek, but also his wallet which had been in his back pocket.

Buried under the rubble, they also found a stolen car with Tony's other shoe wedged inside.

Gibson and young Tony were charged with the arson of the Tara Street house, which just happened to be one that Big Jim Byrnes had been in the process of buying.

Big Jim, who was planning to demolish the house to build townhouses, subsequently tried - unsuccessfully - to have the price reduced.

Four days after their disastrous attempt to blow up the house, Gibson's mother, Lorraine, received a call from Big Jim's best friend, Tony Vincent senior. "If Max ever says anything about young Tony, I'll make sure you are fixed up," he said.

The last time Max Gibson was seen alive was leaving court at the end of that first day of the joint arson trial he and Tony Vincent junior were facing. He was meant to be meeting his girlfriend, a pole dancer at Lady Jane's at 7pm. He didn't show.

When Gibson didn't turn up for court for three days in a row, the judge abandoned the arson trial.

The following Monday afternoon, five days after he was last seen alive, Gibson's body was found in a stormwater drain in Marrickville. He was still wearing his suit from court.

At first police thought he had died of a heroin overdose. Even though there was no syringe nearby and Gibson's mobile phone was missing.

That was until they realised he was left handed and wouldn't have injected himself in his left arm.

Tony Senior and Big Jim were named as persons of interest in the subsequent coronial inquiry into Max Gibson's murder. Big Jim asked the coroner if there could be a suppression order on his evidence because a certain member of the Fairfax press persisted in writing unflattering articles about him.

The Coroner pointed out she had seen us having lunch the previous day, to which Big Jim replied, “but that’s because we are parents of the same child.”

All eyes were fixed on me and my bad behaviour. To my horror the counsel assisting proclaimed: “I can see the *Telegraph’s* headline tomorrow: ‘*Herald* journalist has witness’s love child’.”

What Big Jim meant to say was that we were parents at the same school.

Speaking of being parents at the same school, Big Jim tried to get me to do a duo with him at the parents’ karaoke night. He wanted us to sing anything you can do I can do better.

When I declined, he offered to throw in the services of his friend Roger Rogerson on the piano. I was horrified. Rogerson was the most corrupt cop this state has ever seen. Since Big Jim’s kind offer, Rogerson has been jailed for life for the murder of a uni student Jamie Gao, who was trying to sell Rogerson a huge amount of cocaine.

Over the years, the family of the now jailed politician Eddie Obeids haven’t been backwards either. During one of the many corruption inquiries into Eddie Obeid's activities, his son-in-law Majid Saab raised his fist as though to strike me. His brother Andrew Saab, who has bikie connections, threatened me via social media:

“You effing ugly putrid smelly filthy red neck unprofessional pig - keep writing bullshit posts on Twitter and we’ll see how much longer u last u dog.”

Jamie Vincent had described me as a “stinking ugly old hag” and now here was an Obeid relative saying I was putrid and smelly! I started to become very self-conscious about my personal hygiene or lack thereof.

In the early hours of a Saturday morning a while back there I was fast asleep when my phone beeped. Who could be sending me a text at 1.46am?

It was Eddie Hayson and he was texting to tell me I was a “dirty unwashed beast.”

It is tragic enough to be called a beast - but to be called a “dirty unwashed beast” by that pillar of the sporting world, Eddie Hayson is – in my mind - catastrophic.

I mean just because Eddie Hayson is a former bankrupt, brothel owning chronic gambler who has been banned from every TAB in the country and from the Star Casino – does not mean he hasn’t got an acute sense of smell.

Was he lying awake tossing and turning in the wee hours of the morning thinking someone really has to tell her. Especially given the previous week he was trying to do me a favour.

It was a Sunday afternoon and I was having lunch with friends when Eddie Hayson accidentally sent me a message saying: "Race 5 port Macquarie no 2 urban prince. Get on it".

I jokingly replied in my best gansta lingo : "We are set at ten large".

Realising his message had presumably not been delivered to its intended recipient, Hayson responded: "If you had any brains you would be."

Meanwhile I looked up the race field in Port Macquarie and suggested Eddie would be better to put his money on a horse called "Before You Think".

As for Urban Prince, well it wasn't such a sure thing after all, coming in at third place. When I pointed out his tip was a dud he replied, "You got the jockey to pull it up didn't you".

Investigative journalism is not for the faint hearted. I know our job is not to be loved – our job is to tell the truth and do so without fear or favour. But sometimes dealing with the Narcissists, the Nefarious and the Ne'er Do Wells: does get you down.

When it does - you remind yourself that courageous and well-researched investigative journalism can actually make a difference to society. Corrupt businessmen can be held to account. Those politicians that look you right in the eye and tell you a barefaced lie - they can be exposed. And when I go to sleep at night I sometimes remind myself that some of those people I have written about are now in small confined spaces where sleeping peacefully at night might not be so easy.