THE ‘EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES’:

THE ROLE OF THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PRESS AND STATE GOVERNMENT IN SELLING THE STORY OF THE NORTHBRIDGE CURFEW

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2007.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains

as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a
degree at any tertiary education institution.

_________________________________

Catriona (Karin) Mac Arthur
ABSTRACT

The Northbridge curfew is one of the stand-out success stories of Western Australia’s Labor Government. Introduced in June 2003 in an alleged bid to make the streets safer, the Northbridge curfew has enjoyed overwhelming popular support and consistently high recognition in public opinion polls. This is despite the fact that the curfew bypasses those known to be responsible for most of the crime in the precinct (white males aged 18 to 35 years), targeting instead young people aged under 18 and affecting indigenous girls in particular. The curfew did not introduce any legislative changes (the police already had the powers under the Child Welfare Act 1947 to apprehend young people); neither did it allocate any additional resources to the organisations working with young people in Northbridge. Yet the coverage of the curfew in the WA press implied that indigenous youth presented a serious problem in Perth’s premier entertainment district and that the State Government was doing something about it.

This thesis uses a framing analysis of the press coverage of the Northbridge curfew as well as interviews with the relevant journalists and government media advisers to demonstrate how news values, work routines and political imperatives encouraged the WA press and State Government to work together in creating a ‘fable’ about Northbridge that criminalised indigenous youth. I argue that the story of the Northbridge
curfew, like the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’, presents a deliberate distortion of reality and that the various stages of its development illuminate the processes by which media and government can collaborate to manipulate public opinion.

I draw on my research findings to present recommendations designed, first, to encourage media professionals to develop a range of sources beyond government and, second, to draw the attention of the State Government to the broader ramifications of the Northbridge curfew story for all members of the Western Australian community.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my father, who taught me from an early age to speak up for those less well equipped than I to speak up for themselves.

My heart-felt thanks to all the many people who participated in this project. I have been simply overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of members of the Western Australian news media, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Mission Australia, the Nyoongar Patrol and others who gave so willingly of their time to help me to understand how the fable of the Northbridge curfew came to be, even though many were themselves being held to account for the role that they had played in the telling of the story. I hope that the recommendations that I present in this paper, which their magnanimity made possible, will serve them as they continue in their respective professions. Thanks, too, to my family and friends who have patiently listened – sometimes even with enthusiasm – to all the minutiae that this project has involved over the last three years. I am particularly grateful to my mother who made it possible for me to take time off work while keeping my dog in the gourmet biscuits to which he is accustomed. I would also like to thank Dr Leela de Mel, former Executive Director of the Office of Multicultural Interests, for enabling me to take study leave and without whose support this project would never have got off the ground. I am also very grateful to have had the opportunity to work
directly with Dr Geoff Gallop, former Premier of Western Australia, who was steadfastly committed to combating racism during his time in office and who demonstrated the difficult and complex business that is politics.

Finally, I am indebted to my wonderful supervisors, Associate Professor Gail Phillips and Dr Kathryn Trees, who have been a source of constant encouragement and support, always ready with a comb in hand to untangle my thoughts and send me off once more with renewed enthusiasm and vigour. Thank you to you all.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALS</td>
<td>Aboriginal Legal Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td><em>Child Welfare Act 1947</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCD</td>
<td>Department for Community Development (Government of Western Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPC</td>
<td>Department of the Premier and Cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMO</td>
<td>Government Media Office (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HREOC</td>
<td>Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAG</td>
<td>Juvenile Aid Group (WA Police Service)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Mission Australia (Western Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEAA</td>
<td>Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCP</td>
<td>Office of Crime Prevention (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Government of Western Australia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Public relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCIADIC</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
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