The Media
For most people, the “mass media” – internet, newspapers, television, radio, magazines - is the major source of information about parliament and government. The media in all formats is more than just news and information, it also conveys views – attitudes and opinions. Although most news organisations are privately owned (the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) is one exception), this is not necessarily the same as being “independent” or “neutral”. Most Australian media organisations are commercial enterprises which, through the sale of advertising or products (including newspapers or magazines), seek to make profits for their owners or shareholders. The media is also a provider of entertainment as well as news, and “news reporting” can become, at least partially, another product packaged and delivered in a way that supports the commercial goals of the organisations.

The ability to express an opinion is a fundamental tenet of democracy, but it is important to democracy that a range of opinion and viewpoints can be heard. Different information sources can produce different points of view on an issue or event, while single sources might only give a limited view. A TV report, for instance, of an issue raised in parliament, will be very brief and may focus on some aspect that makes for a more interesting and visual story. A newspaper story might provide much more detail about what was actually said. It can be interesting to compare different newspaper accounts and possibly a recording of television or a radio news coverage. These can also be compared with the actual words spoken in Parliament (found in the Hansard report for that day on the Parliamentary website).

The Parliamentary Press Gallery
Much of what the media reports about Parliament and the government is the work of reporters collectively known as ‘the Parliamentary Press Gallery’. All members of the government and opposition understand how important the media is in getting their message across to the community. Larger media organisations have specialist reporters who focus on the general area of government, or some particular area such as health or education. Many of the journalists who specialise in government in NSW are part of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, based at Parliament House. The term comes from a gallery in the parliamentary chambers from which reporters can watch the proceedings of the house, but it usually refers to the actual group of reporters officially accredited to work in Parliament House.

Press or Media Releases are given to the media from different government, opposition and community sources. Press conferences are regularly held at Parliament House which has its own Press Conference Room. In a press conference, the person (or people) giving the conference usually sits or stands at a podium to make a statement and then takes questions from the reporters standing in front of them.

Activity: Media Role Play

These role plays are written as a follow up to the parliamentary role play bill – The Abolition of Homework Bill - see Classroom Activity 7 Making the Law. In this scenario, the Government has just introduced this new bill in Parliament. A press release is issued to the press gallery and this will be followed by a press conference. The Opposition has also released a press release countering the Government’s arguments and will also hold a press conference.

Roles:
- Minister for Education
- Director-General of Education
- Shadow Minister
- Minister’s media officer
- Opposition media officer
- Community representative?
- Journalists: e.g. newspapers, television, radio, rural media, news services; etc.
Press Conference Room
The Minister or Shadow Minister should stand or sit at a desk or podium at one end of the room, the reporters standing in a group facing her or him. Microphones, notepads, cameras will add to the atmosphere. After the statement, the journalists should attempt to ask questions which their particular media organisations or readers and/or viewers might be interested in. Often several journalists will want to ask questions at once, so the person giving the press conference usually chooses which questions or which journalist they will reply to.

Role Play 1: The Ministerial Press Conference
The Minister takes centre seat on podium, with the Director-General of Education sitting to their left. The Director-General would usually not speak or comment or answer questions unless the Minister introduces them or invites them to comment. They are often there to give advice if needed, and to show that they support what the Minister is saying.

The Ministerial Media Officer will hand out the Government press release to the journalists and the Minister will make their statement about the bill and government policy based on the press release.

The Minister or the Media officer will then invite the journalists to ask questions which the Minister will attempt to answer briefly and clearly in support of the statement.

The journalists may try to focus the questions on particular aspects which the Minister may prefer not to emphasise so they will constantly attempt to get back to their main message without looking like they are evading issues or refusing to answer questions.

Role Play 2: The Shadow-Ministerial Press Conference
This will be conducted in much the same way, although the Shadow-Minister will not have the Director-General of Education alongside to support them. However, they may bring along a representative of a community organisation or some educational expert to support their case and this person might also make a statement or answer questions.

Debrief
As with any role play, a debrief is valuable and important. Students are allowed to “come out of role” and to reflect on what they learned and how the situation itself affected them and the information process.

Additional Activity: The Story
The press conference could be followed up with the reporters actually writing and filing or presenting their stories in an appropriate way – as radio or TV reports or as written newspaper or journal articles.

The Media Releases
The “government” and “opposition” press or media releases on this subject are presented on the following pages.

Press releases are usually only a single page and have a catchy headline. Many make a strong “newsworthy” statement to begin with; then present their main point quickly in the next paragraph, followed by some more detail; and include several short quotations from key people. They give contact details (usually the media officer or equivalent) so journalists can easily get further information.
PRESS RELEASE

New Bill Frees Students, Teachers and Families from Homework Burden

The Minister for Education, The Hon. Barnabus Barnaby, said today: “A new era in both education and family began in New South Wales this morning with the passage of the *Homework Abolition Bill 2005*. For the first time since formal education began in this state, primary students and teachers can abandon the charade of homework.”

This Bill abolishes from primary schools in New South Wales any assignments or work that is to be completed outside school hours; the giving of classwork as punishment to students; the gathering of materials from home for use in the classroom; reading of books meant for classrooms during hours outside school; and the forced viewing of the news and other uninteresting television shows outside schools hours for use in class the next day.

This Act will recover the integrity of learning and allow time for family activities and for the individual development of students, allowing them to focus on healthy and enriching personal development activities such as sport, participation in community groups such as scouts or guides, and reading books of their own choice.

The Act reduces the workload of teachers, allowing them to focus on effective classroom activities.

Critics have long asked “just how effective is homework anyway”. It has frequently been condemned as pointless busy-work. Even at the Parliament, our Education and Community Relations Section is rung daily by parents – parents, not students – asking such searching and invaluable questions as “How much did it cost to build Parliament House?”, or “What is the second largest city in each state?”. How many “homework assignments” have been produced by cut and paste from encyclopaedias or the internet without students understanding or even reading what they present – concentrating instead on colouring in. How many assignments supposedly done by students are really done by anxious or well-meaning parents who want their children to look good or “get good marks”? What is the validity of including “homework” marks in a students’ assessment which is intended to give an indication of the standards students reach, when half of the so-called student work has been done by their parents?

The new act not only removes a time-waster from the world of education and family life, but ensures that student assessments have greater integrity and will relate to the students themselves, not their families or a helpful local librarian.

*For further information:*

Jean Brown (mobile: 0221 123 321; phone 1234 4321; fax: 1234 4334)
MEDIA RELEASE

Elspeth Nguyen MP
Member for Hopetoun
Shadow Minister for Education
Parliament House, date

New Homework-Ban Bill a “No-Brainer”

“In one of the most foolish acts of an increasingly foolish government, today we saw the government use its numbers to crunch through another Act to further erode education in this state” said Elspeth Nguyen, Shadow Minister for Education, today.

Speaking in the shadow of Parliament House, she went on to say: “Not content with abolishing uniforms and much of the school pride that went with them, or with trying to bribe students to turn up to school by paying them, the government has now removed from the curriculum the whole point of having schools – that of developing independent learning.”

The Opposition poured scorn on the Minister for Education, saying that he seemed to believe that students are just empty vessels that can only be filled up by having teachers pour words into them in person. The government seems blissfully unaware of the individual development and reinforcement of learning that only well-designed homework can provide.

Many teachers will be angered by this legislation and see it, quite rightly, as undermining community valuing of education and their profession.

The government is pandering to certain elements in the community in an attempt to prop up their failing fortunes by this populist appeal to some swinging voters in some marginal electorates.

Far from reducing homework, this Act may see more parents who want to behave responsibly in relation to their children’s education, abandoning formal schooling in favour of home-schooling. Or are the implications of a no-homework act that we can’t have home schooling either? Has the Minister thought of that? Has the Minister thought at all? Perhaps the Government should have done their own homework better.

The Opposition, when sane government is returned in this state, will revoke this and other retrograde legislation passed by this government – hopefully before it is too late to begin to undo the iniquitous effects which it has had on students and the future of the state.

For further information:
Elspeth Nguyen / John Green (mobile: 0112 321 123; phone 1234 9876 1234 ; fax: 1234 9887)