



RIP Republican

In his 1989 book *Media Mates*, Paul Chadwick charted the brief existence of the *Business Daily*, an independent daily paper established by Melbourne business journalist Michael Gill. It was launched on 6 July 1987, and lasted only 38 issues. Chadwick wrote: '*Business Daily* did not fail in the sense that the test was never reasonable. Six weeks in newspaper terms is equivalent to the first few hesitant breaths of a newborn baby.'

Snap!

Earlier this year I was employed on *The Republican*, an independent national weekly newspaper, edited by Sybil Nolan, which was launched with high hopes and much good will on 14 March. On 1 April, along the other four Melbourne editorial staff including the editor, I was retrenched on the stated grounds of a liquidity crisis. We had produced three issues. We worked one more day to put the fourth to bed, held a wake, then got on with our lives.

The paper did continue, under a new editor, Malcolm Newell, who was based in Adelaide. I cannot comment on its quality: I was too upset about the whole episode to read it. Other people told me that it was quite good, though lacking hard news.

Then in September I received a letter from a firm of chartered accountants, Love & Rogers Hall Chadwick, telling me that I had become, for the first time in my life, creditor to an insolvent company.

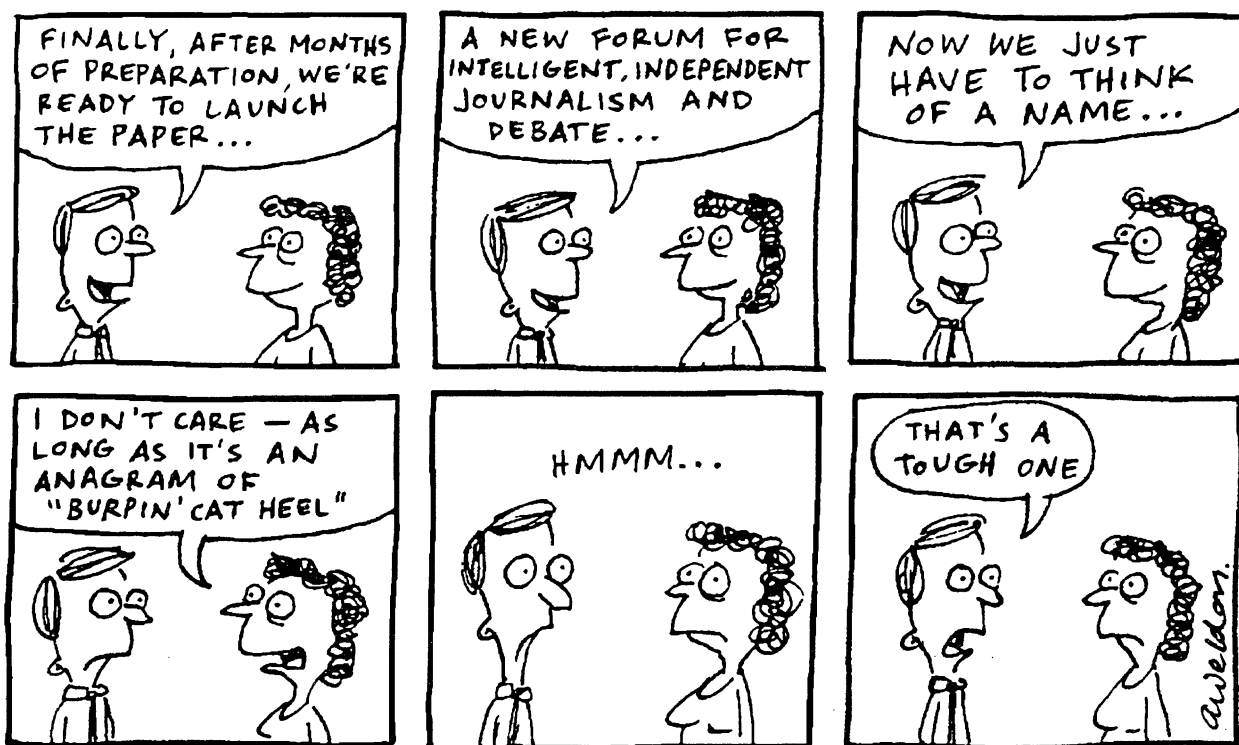
The Republican Weekly Limited, the letter said, had assets of \$76,375, with a realisable value of \$40,590. Against this were liabilities of \$103,555, leaving an 'estimated deficiency' of \$62,965. Part of this deficiency was my superannuation. Given that the masthead accounted for \$30,000 of the estimated realisable value, I don't expect to see any of it.

So this was the end – predictable, perhaps, but sad – of what had been a noble enterprise.

Despite everything, I am glad I was involved, to have been part of the small but extraordinarily enthusiastic and dedicated team who worked 10 and 12 and 14 hour days to make the paper happen.

Our office was the top floor of an old warehouse in South Melbourne. The windows did not open, and there was one, small, portable air conditioner – this during the second-hottest Melbourne February recorded.

The office had character, though. It was equipped with a drum kit, a basketball hoop, and two guinea pigs. And the staff worked well together, despite the heat and endless problems with the computer system. The four papers which we put out were pretty good, and improving. Given time, *The Republican* would have got better. Who knows, given time, it might even have succeeded. Given half a chance. Maybe.



The cover of the invitation to the launch of *The Republican*. Reproduced with the generous permission of the cartoonist, Andrew Weldon.



Well, no.

In truth, *The Republican* was doomed, utterly and from the beginning.

There were two main reasons.

The first was lack of capital. The retrenchment of the editorial staff occurred 18 days after the first issue had come out. The reason given was that revenue had not lived up to expectations. Perhaps it hadn't, but in 18 days it is scarcely possible for revenue be anything at all. We had sold about 11,000 copies of each issue, which was less than was hoped, but if cashflow was such problem it would not have mattered if we had sold 100,000 copies: we still would have gone to the wall.

The other problem was management difficulties.

The managing director of *The Republican*, Pat Thompson, gave some insight into his approach in a recent interview in *Media Australia Update*. He noted that the announced intention of the paper to 'cap advertising at 25 percent' had proven optimistic.

'Our problem was, we couldn't get five percent,' he told *MAU*, 'I think its very difficult to get advertising in a new paper of any sort. I also think its very difficult to get the right sort of person to sell advertising. There are people who sell advertising and do it well, but we were unable to secure anybody . . . We tried about 20 people . . . Often the problem was you'd spend time talking to people who were interested in doing it and they wouldn't actually get going. We had one woman in the Blue Mountains . . . and we spent a lot of time with her but she didn't come good.'

The first hint, for me, that the paper's outlook was grim came on my fourth day working there. There was a dispute between editorial staff and management over the appearance of a promotional 'souvenir issue' which was about to be printed. There were valid arguments on both sides, and the decision eventually reached was reasonable enough: but it was only reached after hours of loud argument and threats of resignation. I wondered at the time: If this is how we deal with small problems, how will we cope with the big ones?

By retrenching everyone, it turned out.

But there is no point apportioning blame. It is a weakness of journalists that we devote rather too much energy to doing this. Rather, I want to extract some hope from the short life of *The Republican*, because hope there is.

First, the goodwill and enthusiasm which the idea of an independent newspaper generated was strong and widespread. Australians *do* want independent voices in the media, and they are prepared to pay for them. The number of foundation subscribers, and letters and phone calls from interested and supportive people was extremely encouraging. Well managed, perhaps that sup-

port could be translated into a viable publication.

Second, journalists, along with graphic designers, photographers and cartoonists and many other people involved in the media, are prepared to work extraordinarily hard to make a paper like this work. There is enthusiasm, intelligence, even idealism out there; camouflaged at times by fashionable cynicism, but there to be tapped.

Some cautions are necessary, too.

The Republican had several serious flaws. Not least was its name, which was a loser. Too overtly political, and pretty dull besides.

More important, an independent publication must have attitude. It must be unsound, unsafe, get up people's noses. *The Republican* had a bit of this, but needed more. It was a little too much a safe, soft, leftie paper. To succeed, an independent paper must be as tough on its friends as on its enemies.

A related problem stems from Australia having lived with a lack of diversity for so long that we have rather forgotten what diversity is like. Almost all our good journalists work for Fairfax or the ABC for lengthy periods, which encourages a certain homogeneity. Worse, these organisations have become a kind of Bureau of Standards peg by which quality journalism is judged, both by the public and the industry. *The Republican* suffered from this: at times it had a 'Fairfax sans resources' feel. An independent paper needs to consciously chuck out the Fairfax peg: rudely and loudly if need be.

The worst thing which can come of *The Republican* fiasco is that it convinces people that an independent newspaper is an impossibility. This is not true: it is hard, certainly, but not impossible. It just requires skill, cheek, and innovation.

Claud Cockburn, the left-wing British journalist who in the 1930s produced a small but hugely influential news letter called *The Week*, started the publication in the depths of the Depression with capital of 40 pounds.

'Don't you understand,' he told anxious friends before the first issue came out, 'that a glider doesn't *need* a bloody engine.'

Years later he wrote: 'Friends and enemies are in agreement on at least one fact. It is that *The Week* exercised an influence and commanded an attention grossly, almost absurdly, out of proportion to its own resources. I say this is important because it is a demonstration of how much you can do with little . . . The report that God is on the side of the Big Battalions is propaganda put out by the Big Battalion commanders. They hope thereby to spread alarm and despondency among the smaller forces.'

It is propaganda we must not believe.

Richard Evans