



After losing a deal, Stokes' newspaper pursued Forrest; Business dispute

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Body

In February 2023, businessman Andrew Forrest decided to shame his home state newspaper, The West Australian, for engaging in what he said was commercial retaliation over a missed contract.

The move didn't work.

Since Dr Forrest recorded a video that criticised reporting in The West, the Kerry Stokes-controlled paper has published 78 articles about him or his company, **Fortescue** Metals Group, according to the paper's website. Sixty-five had a negative slant.

They included coverage of job cuts and executive departures ("The list of those walking away from Forrest keeps growing"), business problems ("Andrew Forrest the new victim of nickel price agony"), and Dr Forrest's separation from his wife, Nicola Forrest ("Shock twist in Andrew Forrest's marriage breakdown").

One of the few articles about Dr Forrest available free on the paper's website reports a denial, which Dr Forrest made to another paper, that he fathered three illegitimate children. Another wrote that Dr Forrest had described himself as his staff's "humble servant" - and was published with a photo of him wearing a cravat.

The latest, two weeks ago, suggested **Fortescue's** dividends might be cut. **Fortescue** shares have risen 80 per cent since October 2022, when the paper's reporting seemed to turn negative.

The coverage raises a question: is Mr Stokes' power in Western Australia so great that it cannot be challenged, even by a billionaire five times as rich?

Mr Stokes, who denies giving his newspaper instructions, was Australia's 12th-richest person last year, according to the Financial Review Rich List. Dr Forrest was second.

"Editorial decisions have nothing to do with Kerry Stokes," a spokesman for the billionaire said. "To put that proposition to him would be totally misguided."

A spokeswoman for Dr Forrest, who was in Washington yesterday, said he would not comment.

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Dr Forrest has asserted that the coverage was triggered by Fortescue's decision to buy a hydrogen-powered fleet of trucks from a Swiss-German manufacturer instead of WesTrac, a construction equipment business owned by Seven Group Holdings, which is controlled by Mr Stokes. Dr Forrest had received mostly positive coverage in the paper, which lasted until a few months after Fortescue struck the truck deal in June 2022, after negotiations with WesTrac stalled over the vehicles' fuel systems.

"I made it really clear if they don't change that stance, I don't bluff," he said in February last year when asked about the contract.

Some of the critical stories appeared on the front page, hurting Dr Forrest's reputation and likely damaging morale at Fortescue.

The West Australian does not have a state-based competitor, and Mr Stokes controls the Seven television network, which broadcasts the most popular news bulletin in Perth. Facing off against a local media monopolist, Dr Forrest decided to record the video for his staff to present his side of the story.

"Everyone loves positive disruption and improvement in technology and in society, except perhaps when it happens to them," he said. "This, I believe, is the case and what has inspired the biased, inaccurate reporting of The West."

Mr Stokes, 83, comes from an era when media proprietors freely used their outlets to help their business interests. He feels that he is unfairly criticised by bigger media companies based on the east coast, according to a person who knows him.

Seven West Media, which owns The West Australian, is worth \$310 million. Nine Entertainment Co, which owns The Australian Financial Review, is worth \$2.5 billion.

Last month, Seven West Media said it had decided to terminate a contract to print the Financial Review in Perth. The print edition of the paper won't be available in the city from May 22, further strengthening the power of Mr Stokes' paper.

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