

AUSTRALIA'S RIGHT TO KNOW

February 25, 2009

Media release

More Protection for Whistleblowers

The media coalition Australia's Right to Know today welcomed a new parliamentary report which recommends increased protection for public service whistleblowers but said the proposed reforms should go further if public servants were to protect the public they serve without fear of prosecution.

The report – Whistleblower Protection: a comprehensive scheme for the Commonwealth public sector – was released today by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs.

The Committee has recommended that whistleblowers are protected if their disclosures to the media meet certain criteria.

Speaking on behalf of the Right to Know coalition, Mr John Hartigan, the chairman and chief executive of News Limited said: "This report is a strong step in the right direction but the report is also deficient in critical areas".

"On the plus side, we welcome the proposed protection for whistleblowers in situations where their actions would bring to light any immediate or serious harm to public health and safety," Mr Hartigan said.

"Clearly, transparency and accountability are central to good government and increased protection for public servants who are trying to follow these principles is most welcome," he said.

"This is both a welcome improvement on the current situation in which these whistleblowers have no protection at all and is clearly in the public interest.

Mr Hartigan said that while the Committee's recommendation to extend protection to disclosures made via the media was welcome, the scope of protection should be widened to include the threat of serious harm in categories other than just public health and safety.

"The report fails to recommend protection for whistleblowers that expose corruption or maladministration, even if the problem is ignored by the bureaucracy or where an investigation has taken too long or has failed to resolve the issue. Clearly this is not in the public interest and is a fundamental shortcoming in the Committee's report.

...2



“Experience shows that the media is an important safety valve for a democratic society to learn about other threats. The report as it stands will allow protection only when the threatened serious harm is ‘immediate’. In reality this will be far too restrictive.

“We urge the Government, in its proposed legislation, to fully redress these issues and provide forthright protection for whistleblowers where disclosure of vital matters affecting the public interest is being wilfully frustrated” said Mr Hartigan.

End

For further information:
Greg Baxter, News Limited: 02 9288 3242 or 0419 461 368
Bruce Wolpe, Fairfax Media: 02 9282 3540 or 0412 259 276