

# AUSTRALIA'S RIGHT TO KNOW

April 30, 2010

Media release

## Australia gains ground on free speech

The Right to Know media coalition today marked the eve of World Press Freedom Day with a report card on recent seismic shifts in Australia's free speech record.

The coalition of twelve major media organisations praised the Federal Government for its commitment to bring Australia's free speech in line with other major democracies.

But the coalition warned that many of the gains so far could be lost if the government fails to get its new Freedom of Information Act passed before the next election.

Right to Know is a coalition of twelve major media organisations which formed three years ago in response to the "deeply troubling" state of free speech in Australia.

The coalition's members are News Limited, Fairfax Media, the ABC, Free TV, APN, ASTRA, Commercial Radio Australia, the MEAA, AAP, SBS, Sky News and West Australian Newspapers.

Speaking on behalf of the coalition, News Limited chairman and chief executive John Hartigan said the Federal Government's overhaul of the Freedom of Information Act, as well as its new regime for whistleblowers, were significant wins for free speech.

"These changes are not just gestures or quick policy fixes," he said. "They are profound shifts which I believe will, in time, have a substantial impact on the right of all Australians to access important information which was not available before."

However Mr Hartigan cautioned that time was running out. "If the Freedom of Information Act isn't passed before the election, it could jeopardise a huge amount of good work that's been done over the last three years," he said.

Australia rose to 16<sup>th</sup> place last year in the world rankings of free speech, conducted by the independent group Reporters Without Borders. Three years ago, when Right to Know was formed, we ranked in 35<sup>th</sup> place, behind Bolivia, Bulgaria and El Salvador.

Mr Hartigan said it was now vital to maintain the gains, and Australia should be wary of such measures as the mandatory internet filter proposed by Communications Minister Senator Stephen Conroy.

"It's disappointing that the filter has landed us on the Reporters Without Borders watch list for internet censorship, alongside Eritrea, South Korea, Russia, Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka," he said.

.../2



Mr Hartigan said the media coalition's freedom of speech report card contained ticks for:

- The extensive overhaul of the Freedom of Information Act, due to pass through Parliament this year
- The leadership shown by the governments in Queensland, NSW and Tasmania in also overhauling their Freedom of Information laws
- A new law abolishing conclusive certificates, a mechanism allowing ministers to block FOI requests, leaving no opening for successful appeal
- Proposed protection for public servants who blow the whistle on corruption, maladministration or danger
- Plans to remove the crime of sedition from our statute books, replaced by the more specific crime of inciting violence
- A review of the Commonwealth Secrecy laws which is promising but ongoing, so results are not known
- Plans for uniform national laws applying to court suppression orders

But Right to Know issued crosses for:

- Proposed improvements to a journalists' right to protect the identity of confidential sources, which are a good start but do not go far enough
- The failure of the South Australian, Victorian and WA governments to follow the Commonwealth's lead in conducting major reform of their FOI laws
- Failure to implement a national register of court suppression orders, promised before the last election
- The risk that the government will fail to pass its proposed whistleblower protections in its first term
- ASIO powers to collect information and detain people who may have information about terrorism which are too broad
- Court powers to suppress anti-terrorism trials which are also too broad and may prevent the public knowing even harmless details of such cases

Mr Hartigan said: "Right to Know acknowledges that good progress has been made and Australia's free speech landscape is better now than it was when the Rudd government came to power.

"It is too early to say how much these changes will impact the day-to-day efforts of the public and journalists to find information they are entitled to, but it's a good start."

The ABC's managing director Mark Scott, also speaking on behalf of the media coalition, cautioned that true reform needed more than laws and policies alone.

"We need is a culture shift and a spirit of openness and transparency, which is only possible with leadership and commitment from the top," he said.

Ends

**For further information:**

**Lucinda Duckett**  
**Corporate Communications Manager, News Limited**  
 02 9288 3125 or 0413 382 558, [ducketti@newsLtd.com.au](mailto:ducketti@newsLtd.com.au)

**Gail Hambly**  
**Group General Counsel & Company Secretary**  
**Fairfax Media**  
 (02) 9282-2062 or 0419 207 269, [GHambly@fairfaxmedia.com.au](mailto:GHambly@fairfaxmedia.com.au)