

AUSTRALIA'S RIGHT TO KNOW

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Media Release

Australia's Media Slams Police Raid

Australia's major media organisations have unanimously condemned a raid by police yesterday at the Sunday Times in Perth as a "farfical and transparent attempt by a police force to punish journalists and whistleblowers if a government suffers political embarrassment".

Sixteen police from the WA Fraud Squad raided the Sunday Times offices yesterday afternoon with a search warrant to find the source of a story about a State Government decision to spend an extra \$16 million on advertising, allegedly to support its re-election campaign.

Several documents were removed by police as part of the four hour raid during which officers blocked exits to identify and search staff as they left the building.

Speaking on behalf of the media coalition Australia's Right to Know, News Limited chairman and chief executive Mr John Hartigan said: "This is a disturbing reminder that governments in Australia will resort to legal muscle to redress political embarrassment".

"Do we now live in a country where whistleblowers and journalists can expect to be hunted down and charged if they reveal government information that is a matter of legitimate public interest? The answer, regrettably, appears to be yes," Mr Hartigan said.

"Can the Western Australian police commissioner confirm that the Government has not been involved in any way in its investigation or yesterday's raid? "

"If there are laws that allow people telling the truth to be charged and convicted, those laws need to be changed," said Mr Hartigan.

The Right to Know coalition has called for legislative reform at federal and state levels to protect whistleblowers and journalists from prosecution if they disclose matters of public interest that don't threaten national security or endanger lives.

Last year, a former customs officer Allan Kessing was convicted of leaking long-ignored reports on lax security at Australia's airports. Mr Kessing denies leaking the reports but their publication in The Australian in 2005 severely embarrassed the previous federal government and forced it to spend \$200 million improving airport security.

In 2007, two Herald Sun journalists, Michael Harvey and Gerard McManus were convicted of contempt of court for refusing to disclose the source of a story that the federal government planned to withhold \$500 million of benefits to war widows and veterans.

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Late last year the Moss Report an independent study into the “deeply troubling erosion of free speech in Australia” concluded that “support for whistleblowers, important for exposing corruption or maladministration, is either non-existent or flawed”.

The Moss Report found that “journalists in Australia are inadequately served by legislation and the common law in relation to their ability to protect the identity of sources” and that “laws and regulatory tools that are meant to facilitate the flow of information do not serve the public well on matters of government accountability”.

“There are about 500 pieces of legislation which, to one degree or another, contain “secrecy” provisions or restrict the freedom of the media to publish certain information”, the Moss Report said.

Mr Hartigan said the Right to Know coalition would be pushing hard for reforms this year that will restore free speech as one of the fundamental pillars of Australian democracy.

“Australia ranks poorly by world standards on free speech. The raid yesterday is something we associate with third world dictatorships or the old Eastern bloc. It is not something we should tolerate in Australia,” Mr Hartigan said.

“Over the next two days, journalists from Australia and overseas will discuss the future of journalism at a conference in Sydney ahead of the annual Press Freedom dinner. Saturday is United Nations World Press Freedom Day. There is no better time to be reminded of the need to defend the public’s right to know how it is governed and how our courts dispense justice,” said Mr Hartigan.

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