

# AUSTRALIA'S RIGHT TO KNOW

May 14, 2008

Media release

## Free Speech – long way to go but so far so good

The Right to Know media coalition today marked its first anniversary with a report card calling on governments to make good their promises on free speech.

In the wake of a police raid on The Sunday Times newsroom in Perth, the Right to Know coalition said it would take “genuine leadership” to bring Australia’s free speech in line with other major democracies.

Right to Know is a coalition of twelve major media organisations which formed in May 2007 in response to the “deeply troubling” state of free speech in Australia.

Members of the coalition include News Limited, Fairfax Media, the ABC, Free TV representing all major commercial TV networks including Nine, Seven and Ten, Commercial Radio Australia, SBS and Sky News.

Speaking on behalf of the media coalition, News Limited chairman and chief executive John Hartigan said: “We welcome and applaud the Prime Minister’s commitment to make his government more open and accountable.”

“The signs are encouraging, but it is vital that they translate into substantive and meaningful reform over the next 12 months. .

“It will take genuine leadership by Mr Rudd and others in his government to start to turn around the culture of secrecy that has been allowed to fester and grow in Australia.”

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

- Prime Minister Rudd’s promise to revamp the Commonwealth FOI laws and practices;
- Prime Minister Rudd’s promise to improve whistleblowers’ protection;
- The Queensland government’s leading role amongst the states in having a far-reaching inquiry into their Freedom of Information laws;
- The NSW Ombudsman’s decision to examine FOI practice in that state
- The commitment by the State and Commonwealth Attorneys-General to a national register for suppression orders;
- A groundswell of support at the 2020 Summit for more open government

But he said there were also big crosses for:

- The police raid on The Sunday Times newsroom last month, hunting the source of a story about a State Government plan to spend an extra \$16m on advertising in an election year
- Treasury’s denial of access under FOI to documents showing how proposed industrial relations changes would impact inflation

- The failure of all states to accept the need to protect journalists who legitimately refuse to reveal their confidential sources.

“Every day, our journalists continue to be unnecessarily thwarted in their legitimate attempts to give Australians vital information about how they’re being governed, how their money is being spent, and the decisions that will affect them,” said Mr Hartigan.

The Right to Know media coalition acknowledged however, that sensible and meaningful reform would take time.

“We have no desire to see half-baked changes rushed through without proper consideration and consultation, but changing the law is only part of the solution”, said Mr Hartigan. .

Fairfax Media CEO David Kirk added “True reform involves more than just changing the law, as important as that is.

“We also need sweeping cultural change across all governments, the public service and our court systems towards more open processes.

“The Right to Know coalition is making good progress in raising public awareness and encouraging a serious, renewed commitment to strengthening how our democracy functions. The coming months are crucial to this effort.”

Ends

For further information:

Creina Chapman  
Manager Corporate Affairs, News Limited  
02 9288 1215 or 0411 535 176

Bruce Wolpe  
Director Corporate Affairs, Fairfax Media  
02 9282 3640 or 0412 259 276