

**Welcome everyone.**

**I wish to acknowledge and show my respect for the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting: the Elders, past and present, of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation.**

**And I'd like to thank all of you for being here tonight.**

**This is the biggest fundraising event of the year for our Media Safety and Solidarity Fund. Every dollar raised tonight goes to fund vital projects in the Asia Pacific region.**

**The fund is overseen by a committee of working journalists, and projects are delivered in partnership with the International Federation of Journalists. The fund supports human rights monitoring and advocacy programs and press freedom projects throughout the region.**

**In the last year it provided disaster relief in Vanuatu and Nepal, including direct funding to the families of journalists devastated by those natural disasters.**

**In the Philippines, nearly \$70,000 went to fund the education of the children of journalists killed in the course of their work. 85 children are receiving an education they otherwise would not have. In Nepal \$40,000 was allocated to the education of 51 children in similar circumstances.**

**It's important to remember in many parts of the world, and our region no less so, journalism is a deadly occupation.**

**At the end of 2015, nearly 200 journalists were imprisoned around the world. Another 109 had been murdered in targeted killings, bomb attacks or cross-fire incidents.**

**Tonight we remember that, and also have the chance to reflect on, press freedom here in Australia – with the release of MEAA's annual press freedom report – this year**

entitled *Criminalising the Truth, Suppressing the Right to Know*. It is now available on our website and I urge you all to read it ([www.pressfreedom.org.au](http://www.pressfreedom.org.au)).

The raft of national security laws recently passed here didn't just focus on fighting terrorism; they also silence voices, punish truth-tellers, undermine the public's right to know and criminalise journalism.

When it comes to reporting on government, there is a wall being built designed to stop the truth from coming out.

Let's take asylum seeker policy. Requests for information are met with a blanket refusal to discuss "on-water matters". Questions about asylum seeker detention centres are met with silence. And a new law, the *Border Force Act*, carries a two-year jail term if nurses, doctors and social workers, disclose what the government has determined is "protected" information.

**Despite the threats, courageous whistleblowers still get the truth out. But any news report relying on a confidential source can generate a request to the Australian Federal Police to investigate the leak and prosecute the leaker under section 70 of the *Crimes Act*.**

**In April, the AFP admitted to accessing, without a warrant, the telecommunications data of Guardian Australia journalist Paul Farrell. The AFP trawled through his email records and carried out “subscriber checks” to discover everyone Farrell had contacted.**

**The AFP claims its investigations “are not about targeting journalists”. But in Farrell’s case, the AFP created a 200-page dossier, consisting of 51 documents and more than 800 electronic updates... All done lawfully.**

**But as Edward Snowden commented in this case – sometimes the scandal is what the law allows.**

**Of course, what's even more insidious is that some of the leaks recently referred to the AFP for investigation, that is leaks of Cabinet documents and a draft Defence White Paper, may well come from politicians themselves or their staffers. They are relying on the journalists they have confided in to keep their identity a secret, all the while passing laws that allow the AFP to go trawling through a journalist's emails.**

**And the new two-year mandatory metadata retention laws go even further. Under Journalist Information Warrants, telecommunications data can be secretly accessed by up to 21 government agencies. A so-called Public Interest Advocate, appointed by the Prime Minister, is meant to be there as a safeguard but remember the whole process is secret. Up to two years' worth of telecommunications data can be accessed over the six-month life-span of the warrant – meaning numerous news stories and confidential sources can be compromised and neither the journalist, nor their media employer, will ever know their telecommunications data has even been accessed.**

**All this because the Government is embarrassed: not because a news story is wrong... but because it is true. Truth is a dangerous commodity.**

**Meanwhile, the public service wants to suppress information. Responding in part to the Home Insulation Program disaster of 2009, senior public servants are now openly seeking to lock-up the deliberative advice they give their ministers. Rather than reacting to the pink batts debacle by making government more open and transparent, the public service now describes the *Freedom of Information Act* as “pernicious”, arguing that prudent “risk management” requires the suppression of government information.**

**In just a few short years, Australia has fallen from being a bastion of press freedom to a country that has passed laws that allow government agencies to pursue journalists and their sources. Increasingly, the public’s right to know is**

**denied and moves are underway to lock-up information that should be publicly available.**

**There is a great deal of effort being expended by government to avoid scrutiny. And it's getting worse. These attacks undermine democracy and, once started, it is very hard to turn back the tide.**

**I urge you to read our press freedom report and continue to support our campaign for the public's right to know.**

**And finally, I ask you to give generously tonight to support the Media Safety and Solidarity Fund's work in the Asia Pacific. You'll have plenty of chances to empty your wallets for a great cause. The silent auction items are outside there, and we have some great items for a live auction later this evening.**

**Thanks in advance for your generosity.**

**Now I'd like to leave you with a press freedom video package kindly produced for us by SBS.**

**Thanks once again...**