



**SPEECH: Sydney, Friday, February 26, 2016**

## **Address by MEAA President Simon Collins to 2016 Federal Council**

\*\*\* CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\*\*

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners, past and present, of the land on which this meeting is taking place, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

Welcome colleagues to the 2016 meeting of the Federal Council of the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance.

It is my great pleasure and honour to be addressing you today as Federal President of the MEAA.

Personally, it has been a long journey since I first joined the Musicians' Union of Australia in the late-1970, and I have watched MEAA go through many changes over that time.

I would like you all to join me in expressing my appreciation to my predecessor in this role, Patricia Amphlett, for her tireless service over many years to this union, in particular the past decade as Federal President.

There will be more said about this later in this meeting, but Patricia has made an extraordinary contribution over that time – as has Chris Warren, and it seems quite remarkable that this is the first meeting of this forum to be held by our union without Chris as Federal Secretary.

And I would also like to formally welcome Paul Murphy to this meeting as the inaugural CEO of MEAA.

Most importantly, I want to acknowledge all of you, our elected representatives, for your presence today.

You are testament to the diversity of creativity and talent that can be found among our 16,000 members.

Among you we have journalists and cartoonists, writers, performers from stage and screen, film and stage technicians, event staff, musicians, dancers and more.

You are a snapshot of the immense wealth of creativity and talent that can be found among our 16,000 members.

This weekend, you are sacrificing your own valuable time to attend this meeting.

Why? You don't do it for glory, and you certainly don't do it for the money.

But you do it because you believe in the very essence of unionism – that is being part of a collective and standing together to speak up for what is right. You believe in our industries and you believe in the work you do.

We are living in a period of great change, but one constant is that people still need a union to advance their pay and conditions, to protect their rights at work, to ensure they have healthy and safe working environments, and to give them a voice in the workplace.

This is an auspicious occasion as it is the first meeting of our federal council since the rule changes of 2014 which have resulted in the new governance structure.

This was an important step forward in modernising our union.

Those changes were vigorously debated two years ago, and I don't wish to revisit the arguments in any great detail now.

It is enough to say that the result of the changes has been to increase the importance of federal council as a democratic body.

No longer do employees of MEAA have voting rights.

All staff, from the CEO down, are now employed through a merit process and their tenure in their position depends wholly and solely on how they perform.

The senior staff of this organisation are now more accountable than before, and must take direction from the elected representatives via the section committees, the board, and every two years, this federal council.

The flipside of this is that greater responsibility has also been placed upon elected representatives, including all of us here today.

In a sense, the buck stops with us to ensure that this union is run transparently, efficiently, democratically, and ethically.

I will just leave that with you to consider along with the agenda ahead of us over the next two days.

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Paul will give you a comprehensive overview of the current state of our union in his secretary's report, but I'd like to share a few of my impressions from the 10 months I have been federal president.

As you know, I have been coming to this forum for more than 20 years and I thought I knew our union pretty well before I was elected president.

But hailing from a relatively small corner of MEAA as I do, I have to admit that I wasn't fully prepared for the commitment and dedication of our staff to this union and its members.

It gives me great confidence that MEAA is in good hands, and I am quietly optimistic that we can face up to the challenges that are in front of us.

The union has been through a period of readjustment since this federal council last met.

The first priority of the new board, working with the new CEO, was to get our finances onto a sustainable path.

There has been a strict focus on costs and, sadly, that has included some redundancies. We recognise that for our employees this has been a difficult period and we thank them for their co-operation.

But, as you will hear in more detail in the CEO's report, the result has been that in 2014-15 our union recorded its first surplus in several years.

This will put the union in a healthier state moving forward.

Membership numbers continue to be challenging.

Last year, we effectively held our ground. Job losses in journalism continue to hurt us, but balanced against that has been the continuing growth of the ECS section, which has increased membership by 12% in the past two years through a focus on strategic organising.

We cannot underestimate the hurdles our union continues to face in retaining existing members and recruiting new ones.

MEAA is not unique in that we are being confronted with an unprecedented set of threats: structural and technological change to the industries we operate in, the impact of digital disruption, the breakdown of traditional and permanent models of employment and rise of casual and contract work, politically-driven attacks on unionism, and the tendency of fewer people to be "joiners" than a generation ago.

Many unions are only just discovering this. But MEAA has been dealing with this environment for many years.

We all know the story and understand the reasons. What will make the difference between failure and success will be how we respond.

Standing still is not an option. Doing things the way we always have is not an option.

We have to be ahead of the curve.

Strong organising campaigns will always be important, but they are resource intensive and only work for some types of workplaces.

For unions to remain strong and relevant in this environment, they need to adapt, to be nimble and innovative and to understand what their members need and how what they want from the union is evolving.

The good news is that our union is already more advanced than many others in thinking about how to respond to this challenge.

We have had no choice: our industries are in a constant state of change; the impact of technology is a constant in the media; and employment in the arts and creative industries is rarely secure.

We need to tailor membership of the union to suit the workers of today.

We have recognised that particularly in media, the old model of large workplaces employing dozens or hundreds of journalists, is fading fast.

In future, more and more journalists will be freelancers or self-employed, so we launched the FreelancePro membership a few years ago with services and benefits tailored for freelance journalists. This is slowly growing in take-up but has reached break-even point.

We are actively examining different membership offerings and looking at new growth areas, such as public relations/communications professionals.

In the ECS section, our professional sports coverage has been bolstered by the formation of the Australian Basketballers' Association, representing both men and women, the soon-to-be-announced Australian Hockey Association, and other opportunities on the horizon. Recently we have also affiliated a new sub-section, the Theatre Orchestra Musicians Association.

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But we need to also give people a reason to join.

We need to understand our membership better, to be relevant to them, and to speak in their language.

Research shows that people join unions for many reasons: traditionally it was to be part of a collective group, knowing that it is only by standing together that workers can bargain equally with employers.

But in today's world, the reasons are more complex. People are looking for benefits and services, networking opportunities, information, and empowerment.

The old model of the boss versus the worker is not relevant to many workers, particularly younger workers and those in smaller workplaces, who see themselves in a form of a partnership with their employer.

People expect their union to help them realise their potential in their career. This may sound self-interested but it is the reality of the modern workforce.

We also need to ensure that members and potential members identify with MEAA as being a union that shares their values.

We will engage with members through solid campaigning around issues that matter to them in their workplace and their industry.

Robust campaigning engages a union with its members and non-members and helps to build the relationship and to identify activists.

By campaigning through our industries and in the broader community, we can overcome the limitations of traditional "insider" bargaining, particularly in an environment of falling membership density.

MEAA will look to embark on campaigns that reinforce it as the most credible advocate for its industries and representative of the interests of its members.

Industrial/workplace bargaining campaigns will continue to be important, but strong industry campaigns can also unite members and non-members around a common issue with all sorts of positive spin-offs for the union.

We have already made significant advances in this direction.

The Save Our Stories campaign to retain the visa rules which regulate the number of foreign performers and crew who can work temporarily in Australia shows what can be achieved if we devote resources to a well-researched campaign that has clear goals and objectives.

Save Our Stories was also significant in breaking down the silos between different sections of our union to campaign together on an issue that affects a large part of our membership.

The future of the ABC is another crucial campaign that has the potential to unite our members and position MEAA as being a leading advocate for independent public broadcasting.

The ABC cuts across all of our sections as thousands of livelihoods of our members are directly or indirectly affected by the ABC, for example, journalists and presenters directly employed by ABC news, TV and radio; performers and crew reliant on the ABC commissioning Australian drama and comedy; orchestra musicians whose work is showcased on ABC Classic FM.

In 2016, an election year, our major cross-sectional campaign will be Hands Off Our ABC.

Key concerns include restoring baseline government funding of the ABC to an adequate level after cuts of \$254 million over the past two years, and ensuring that the ABC and its journalists remain free from political interference.

To support our campaigning, we have also made new investments in communications, including our new website, [meaa.org](http://meaa.org), which went live late last year.

MEAA is blessed that our greatest asset is our membership.

Our members are so passionate and committed to their careers, and if we can tap into that and direct it into activism for the union, then we will be well placed for whatever is to come.

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No doubt, we will have robust arguments over the next few days.

That is a good thing; this meeting should not be a rubber stamp. It is important that we do debate the future directions of this union. Respectful debate is healthy.

I look forward to hearing these debates but at the end of the meeting, we should emerge united and in agreement about the course that has been set and the tasks we have entrusted the CEO and his staff with.

On that note, I declare this meeting open and we will move onto the next item of business.

**\*\*\* ENDS \*\*\***