



**SPEECH: Sydney, Friday, February 23, 2018**

**Address by Simon Collins to 2018 Federal Council**

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, traditional owners and continuing custodians of this land, and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Welcome all of you to the 2018 MEAA Federal Council.

And a particularly warm welcome to those of you who are attending your first meeting of our governing body. After last year's elections, we have had significant renewal and there are 32 fresh faces at this year's Federal Council. It is wonderful to see so much enthusiasm and commitment to the goals of our union in this room.

I am delighted that you have decided to step up your activism and involvement in our union. It is people like you who are the lifeblood of our union.

I would also like to take this opportunity to put on the record my appreciation to those delegates who did not seek re-election last year and thank them for their service on behalf of our members.

Congratulations to our re-elected Section Presidents: Chloe Dallimore from Equity, David Turnbull from Entertainment, Crew & Sport and Cameron Brook from Musicians.

Joining them for his first term is the new Federal President of the Media Section, Marcus Strom. Again, my appreciation to his predecessor, Stuart Washington, who decided not to seek re-election after two terms in the position.

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Our union has now been together for a quarter of a century. There were plenty of sceptics when the amalgamation of the AJA, Actors Equity and the ATAEA was first suggested in the early-1990s.

But 25 years later, our sections – with the addition of musicians – work effectively as both vigorous advocates of their own sectors and parts of a coherent whole.

We are bound by a unity of purpose to campaign for good jobs throughout the media, entertainment and the arts.

There is never a shortage of challenges and the true test of character is how we respond to these challenges.

This Federal Council is an opportunity for us to take stock of these challenges and to map out our path for the next few years.

The simplest metric of success or failure is our membership numbers and on this measure, MEAA is holding its ground, while around us some other unions are in freefall.

Currently, we have a touch over 15,200 members, which is a marginal increase from when we met two years ago.

Is this good enough? Perhaps not, but I can tell you there would be many other unions who would envy these results.

However, the headline figures only tell part of the story, and delving deeper informs us about our strengths and weaknesses.

It is no secret that the axe that has been taken through the media industry over the past decade as a result of the digital revolution has had a devastating impact on our members. In the past year alone, we estimate 1000 jobs were lost at Australia's major media employers and the result has been a decline in our Media section of about 8% since this time in 2016.

Of course, MEAA has fought back and sought to mitigate against those losses. The Fairfax strike last May filled all of us with pride in the unity of our journalist members at the Sydney and Melbourne mastheads; in their colleagues in Canberra who refused to cross the picket line to cover the Federal Budget; and, in the support and goodwill shown by tens of thousands of ordinary Australians – readers and consumers of Fairfax newspapers.

The big media “shops” that were once the foundations of our union have shrunk, and only a couple of thousand Media members are now covered by enterprise agreements at the large, established employers.

This is a tough environment for our Media Section staff. But there is a silver lining: membership of the FreelancePro category has increased by more than 40%, offsetting some of the losses at the big employers, and a sign that MEAA is becoming increasingly relevant to the freelance community.

On the other hand, the Equity Section has gone from strength to strength. Last year, for the first time since the Union was amalgamated in 1992, our Equity membership exceeded our Media membership.

Part of this was due to that decline of Media, but it was also largely due to the growth of Equity. In the period since our last Federal Council meeting, Equity has increased its membership by almost 6% to over 5400 members.

Credit for this must go to the systematic organisation of performers for stage and screen and for the success of initiatives like Young & Equity, and the Equity wellness and diversity campaigns.

The shining success story is New Zealand Equity, which has increased membership by a staggering 17.5% since 2016 and is fast approaching 1000 members.

The Entertainment, Crew and Sport Section is holding its own and the growth has continued in the priority area of screen crew, where we have been campaigning for enforceable annual pay increases for film crew and a standard template workplace agreement for overseas-funded movie productions, including Hollywood blockbusters.

Membership of the screen technicians category grew by 22% since the last Federal Council meeting and is now almost 1000.

Our Musicians Section maintains very high density in the symphony orchestras and is now also looking to expand into the freelance music scene.

It's exhausting work to maintain our membership numbers.

Each year we recruit or reactivate well over 3000 members – 20% of our overall membership.

It's a tribute to our organising and membership staff that we are able to do this, but what that also tells you is that through natural attrition we are losing more than 3000 members a year. We cannot stand still.

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The challenges of our changing industries mean hard decisions need to be made about how to best allocate limited resources.

Do we continue to focus on resource-intensive bargaining campaigns at the traditionally largest workplaces? Do we put more resources into servicing our existing memberships in areas of strength? Or do we take the risky approach of concentrating resources on searching out and organising in new areas?

At MEAA, we are responding through innovation.

Just as the industries within which our members work are rapidly changing, so is the Union. As I say, we cannot stand still. We cannot rely on the old ways. We cannot yearn for the past and hope for a return to the days of the closed shop.

Of course, there is still a place for large-scale organising of large workplaces. There is still a place for enterprise bargaining.

But **only** organising around a diminishing number of traditional workplaces is a slow but sure path to decline and irrelevance.

Increasingly, our members are in smaller, dispersed workplaces. Freelance work has always been more predominant in our industries than many others, and it is increasing. So is casualisation, short-term contracts and the so-called "gig economy".

To best serve our members in the contemporary workplace, we have had to rethink what is the optimal model for our union. We have to be responsive to the needs of workers in this environment. We need to go where the members are, to research and understand what motivates them and what they are looking for from a union, and we need to talk to them in their language.

For instance, rather than traditional collective bargaining representation, what they may require is contract advice, debt chasing, professional development and networking opportunities.

This is still a work in progress, but there are green shoots which give some cause for optimism.

In the Media section, two new membership categories have been created for freelance media workers and for communications professionals in the not-for-profit sector.

FreelancePro is now half-a-decade old, and as I outlined earlier, has had considerable growth in the past two years.

CommsPro was launched last year, based on research that there are at least 1000 people who work in communications in the not-for-profit, government or union sectors who are currently not getting what they need from other unions, if they are members of one at all.

But it's not just about special membership categories.

It has become apparent that despite the growth of jobs in digital media, the conditions people are employed under fall far short of those won over the decades in traditional media.

So MEAA is actively organising among digital media start-ups, recruiting members to the cause of a good jobs charter which we will ultimately seek to make an industry standard.

Again, this is an example of identifying a group of workers with specific needs and coming up with a contemporary approach.

Critically, this campaign is being driven by activists: young people at the start of their media careers who know the pressures of digital journalism and are prepared to take action to improve their working lives.

In the Equity section, much of the growth has come from visiting drama and performing arts schools, recruiting student members and then engaging them in the Union when they graduate, through Young & Equity events and systematic follow up.

In the screen crew sector, the growth has come from rallying potential members around an issue – the lack of market rates – and building collective strength to the point where industrial action is a real possibility.

The point of these examples is that no one size fits all. There are no silver bullets. We have to take risks, we have to be innovative.

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In all of these areas, digital communication is an increasingly important tool.

We now have in place sophisticated data collection and management, which combined with social media and the targeted delivery of direct email communication, allows us to reach out to a far greater mass of potential members than we could ever hope to meet through workplace visits or phone calls.

Over the past 12 months, the membership application page on our website was viewed 27,000 times, our Facebook posts reached more than 2 million people, and our Twitter posts were seen by more than 3.7 million users.

Through the use of online petitions and other methods, we have been able to build a supporter/activist email list of almost 46,000 people. This list can be filtered for particular interests and for particular demographics.

These are people who can be mobilised to a cause when we need them, as in the Fairfax strike, when in a seven day period our campaign videos were viewed 310,660 times, 8691 emails were sent to Fairfax CEO Greg Hywood from our website, and we raised \$8000 in donations and t-shirt sales.

Of course, this type of innovation also costs money.

Stringent financial management has allowed the Union to generate small surpluses in recent years: surpluses which we have been able to reinvest in exploring new areas of membership and providing better services to our existing members.

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Numbers are just one measure of the success of a union. It is essential that we grow our density in the industries in which we operate so that we have the strength and power to win results for our members.

But when people join MEAA, it is for more than just industrial help or representation.

We also need to ensure that people identify with MEAA as a union which shares their values.

Our members look to the Union to be a leader in our industries, to advocate and lobby at the highest levels for jobs, for government support, and on a raft of other issues.

We will engage with members through solid campaigning about those issues which matter to them in their workplace and their industry.

Over the past two years, MEAA has sought to raise its profile and step up its campaigning about industry issues.

This means not just making submissions and appearing before inquiries, but in being visible and vocal as champions of independent public interest journalism and press freedom;

- for diverse media ownership and adequate funding for public broadcasting;
- for the protection of Australian children's and drama content on television;
- to ensure that there is an independent and trusted source of funding for the arts;
- to call out and tackle the culture of sexual harassment and bullying in live theatre; and
- for the maintenance of tax incentives and rebates to make sure Australian screen production remains internationally competitive.

People will respond much more positively to the Union when they can see us out in the community arguing for these things. I believe that this will flow through when we launch our associate membership category later this year.

We have made great strides in becoming a more unified union, breaking down the silos of the past, although there will always obviously be different priorities within each of our sections.

A great example of this is the Make It Australian campaign, a joint effort involving the Equity and the ECS sections along with outside organisations like Screen Producers Australia and the Directors' Guild around key issues confronting the future of the film and TV industry.

Campaigns like this which resonate and unify are the model for our future.

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Before concluding, I'd also like just briefly, to refer to MEAA's role as part of the larger union movement.

I know that as a union, we often prefer to stay above the political fray.

Historically – at least since amalgamation – we have not been particularly active in party or factional politics, and the very nature of the work done by our media members means we must tread a very fine line.

But when it comes to the welfare of our members and industry colleagues as workers, it is incumbent upon us as a union to stand up. We did so in the Your Rights At Work campaign

against the Howard government's industrial relations laws a decade ago, and we must do so again.

Later today we will be hearing from the ACTU Secretary Sally McManus. I am sure you will all agree that Sally has made an enormous impact since she was elected a year ago by starting a much-needed debate about the shortcomings of the Australian workplace relations system.

The evidence is plain to see that wages are almost stagnant despite buoyant company profits and almost three decades of continued economic growth. Job security is worsening, while inequality throughout society is widening.

A major reason for this is our labour laws.

There are many areas where a change of the rules would benefit MEAA members, including improved entitlements for independent contractors and eliminating sham contracting; relaxing the restrictions on collective bargaining and the right to join a union; better arbitration and dispute settlement; allowing industry wide bargaining; and removing limits on the right to strike.

As I expect we will hear from Sally, real change will only come about if the community as a whole is convinced it is necessary. Only then will politicians sit up and take notice.

And our union will need to play its part in campaigning for more favourable industrial relations laws.

History has also taught us that we cannot simply rely on promises from politicians, to see favourable laws come to pass.

Change is constant, employers are always finding new ways to screw workers over, the march of technological progress is unstoppable.

So I will again return to my earlier point: we must embrace innovation.

MEAA, like all unions, must transform to connect with people in our industries, using all the available tools at our disposal.

And we must be prepared to challenge ourselves and look beyond the traditional workplaces where we have been strong.

At the end of the day, despite the physical changes to workplaces, the requirements of workers from their union are still the same: 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.

I am confident that MEAA is up to the task. Looking around this room fills me with great optimism that we have the talent and commitment within our union to meet these challenges head on, and to overcome them.

I look forward to robust but respectful debate over the next two days. I hope it will be debate about substantive, strategic issues and the future direction of our union.

As I told the 2016 Federal Council, this meeting should not be a rubber stamp, but when we conclude tomorrow afternoon, we should emerge united and energised.

I now declare this meeting open.