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End the 'cold war' on whistleblowers, journalists and the public's right to know, urges media union

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the union for Australian journalists, is calling on all political parties to commit to better protection of whistleblowers and public interest journalism.

MEAA has written to the major parties and key independents to outline reforms that would support disclosure of information that is legitimately in the public interest.

The reforms would provide greater protection to whistleblowers who contact journalists to pass on information about government or corporate wrongdoing.

Among the proposals suggested by MEAA are consolidated public and private sector whistleblower legislation; an independent statutory office or public interest disclosure panel; immunity from suit and/or direct financial assistance in defending disclosures in the public interest; and strengthened penalties for taking reprisal against a whistleblower.

MEAA chief executive officer Paul Murphy said whistleblowers needed support not harassment.

"We have been disturbed by government and its agencies hunting whistleblowers and ignoring the misconduct and untruths that honest people want to bring to public attention," he said.

"Journalists are tired of political inconvenience and embarrassment being the real drivers behind tying whistleblowers in knots. Whistleblowing should not be about payback and future unemployment; it should be about the free flow of information and acknowledging a public good.

"Australia is a long way from such ideals. Journalists from other countries are frequently astounded at the government secrecy and use of the Australian Federal Police to snoop on and harass whistleblowers and investigative journalists in Australia."

Mr Murphy said secrecy was greatest around asylum seeker policy, and whistleblowers and journalists who sought to inform the public about conditions in offshore detention centres have been targeted.

While MEAA welcomes Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's commitment to allow media access to the Nauru and Manus centres, there is much more to be done in this area.

"These camps have been set up by the Australian government, they operate in the name of the Australian people, and it really is disgraceful that the government attempts to stop the Australian people from finding out what's being done in our names," he said.

The MEAA submission on whistleblowers is available at <http://meaa.io/whistleblowers2016>

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