



# MEDIA RELEASE

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## **Inquiry points the way for press freedom reform**

The recommendations of a Senate inquiry into press freedom would help to curb the growing culture of government secrecy, stop the persecution of whistleblowers and prevent journalists being prosecuted for simply doing their jobs.

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) welcomes the report tabled this afternoon which has responded to many of the concerns raised by media organisations after the Australian Federal Police raids of News Corp and ABC journalists in 2019.

MEAA Media President Marcus Strom said the report recommendations went a long way to clawing back the overreach of dozens Australia's "national security" laws that have been introduced since the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.

"After almost two decades of increased secrecy, culminating in prosecution of journalists for doing their jobs, these recommendations would restore confidence for journalists that they can report on national security issues without the threat of prosecution," he said.

Under the committee's recommendations, a greater onus would be placed on government agencies to prove that reporting on national security matters was not in the public interest, rather than the other way around.

There would be stronger safeguards against the issuing of warrants and the exercise of other coercive powers by the AFP and other government agencies, and there would be improved flow of information and transparency about government activities.

The inquiry was triggered by the Australian Federal Police raids on the home of a Canberra journalist and the Sydney offices of the ABC. The raids sought to identify whistleblowers involved in public interest news stories about government agencies.

MEAA, along with other members of the Australia's Right To Know coalition, gave evidence that dozens of pieces of legislation since the early-2000s had created a culture of secrecy which had a chilling effect on journalism.

The inquiry has recommended several areas of reform, including how government information is classified as secret; improved transparency in the Freedom of Information Act; placing the onus on government agencies to prove an unauthorised disclosure is not in the public interest; and harmonisation of national shield laws.

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Mr Strom said: “It’s welcome that the inquiry has recognised that powers to go after journalists for their public interest journalism need to be overturned. The inquiry has recognised many long-standing press freedom concerns by recommending amendments to the ASIO Act, the Criminal Code Act and the use of coercive powers to prosecute journalists under the Crimes Act.

“It has also urged changes to ensure greater protection for whistleblowers and it has taken up MEAA’s suggestion of a national uniform shield law regime that recognises the ethical obligation of journalists to never reveal the identity of a confidential source. Importantly, it has urged the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions to review whether the prosecution of former Army lawyer, whistleblower David McBride, should go ahead – the Brereton Inquiry into allegations of war crimes committed by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan has vindicated McBride’s action,” he said.

MEAA will examine the full detail of the report in coming days but notes that the inquiry has made a good start in addressing issues that have undermined the public’s right to know what our governments do in our name.

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