**Thanks David and good evening everyone.**

**I wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Elders, past and present, of the Yuggera and Turubul peoples – the traditional custodians of the lands in the Brisbane area.**

**The Walkley award for Freelance Journalist of the Year was presented at a ceremony in July.**

**This year the award was won by filmmaker Yaara Bou Melhem for her outstanding body of work: “Australia - At Home and Abroad”, broadcast on *Al Jazeera English*.**

**Please join me in recognising her achievement.**

**The Walkley Awards are a celebration of the best in Australian journalism. They are also a reminder of the vital role journalists play in our democracy through informing our community.**

**When the Oxford Dictionary word of the year is “post-truth”, it is I think more important than ever to celebrate our work, and the work of our colleagues.**

**Telling the truth is often difficult. And as we are all too acutely aware, in many parts of the world it is downright dangerous.**

**The concern for all of us is that danger level is increasing and multiplying across the world.**

**Addressing the Committee to Protect Journalists recently in New York, Christiane Amanpour said:**

**“First the media is accused of inciting, then sympathizing, then associating – until they suddenly find themselves accused of being full-fledged terrorists and subversives.**

**Then they end up in handcuffs, in cages, in kangaroo courts, in prison – and then who knows?”**

**She was speaking in the context of the extraordinary comments from President-elect Trump, accusing the media of inciting protests against his election. His colourful Twitter account frequently includes attacks on the media.**

**And during the campaign many media organisations had to begin providing security for their journalists attending Trump rallies.**

**When respect for truth and the public’s right to know are gone, our world becomes a much more dangerous place.**

**And of course Australia is not immune from these threats. As MEAA has been pointing out repeatedly.**

**In the space of just a few years, legitimate public interest journalism has been criminalised. It’s extraordinary now that a journalist reporting on an Asio operation could be jailed for up to 10 years for simply doing their job.**

**As part of laws passed by the Parliament, whistleblowers – those people who seek to expose fraud, corruption, dishonesty and illegality – face lengthy jail terms too.**

**And thanks to its new metadata retention powers, the government can hunt down whistleblowers by using journalists’ telecommunications data. And if anyone ever reveals the government has been trawling through the phone calls and emails, they face two years jail.**

**Meanwhile the laws of defamation are having a chilling effect on vital investigative journalism in this country. Rich and powerful interests can use an army of lawyers to muzzle legitimate scrutiny.**

**It is high time the defamation regime that operates across the country is reviewed.**

**Governments are also locking up information or simply refusing to comment. In 2010 the Australian Law Reform Commission identified 506 secrecy provisions in legislation. Many more such provisions have been added since**.

**Of course in other parts of the world the picture is far bleaker.**

**Under President Erdogan’s wave of repression, Turkey has become the world’s biggest jail for journalists: at least 145 of our colleagues have been locked up, another 600 have had their media credentials cancelled, and more than 130 media outlets have been closed.**

**Around the world in 2016, 77 journalists and media workers have died in targeted, or cross-fire, killings. Our own region has suffered in particular, with 12 dead in Afghanistan, 5 in India, 5 in Pakistan and two in the Philippines.**

**In the Philippines, seven years have now gone by since the greatest single atrocity committed against the media: the massacre of 58 people including 32 journalists in Mindanao. Seven years and still not a single person found guilty, with dozens of suspects still at large.**

**MEAA campaigns for press freedom in these cases. But we need your help. A decade ago we established the Media, Safety and Solidarity Fund to assist journalists and their families in the Asia-Pacific region through times of emergency, war and hardship.**

**I urge you to make a donation to the Fund tonight (you can complete the coupons on your table). For those watching the Walkleys broadcast, search for Media Safety and Solidarity Fund on the MEAA web site: meaa.org**

**The money you give helps educate the children of journalists who have been killed in our region – remember that the slain journalist may have been the sole breadwinner in the family. This year, the Media Safety and Solidarity Fund has helped fund the schooling of 31 children in Nepal and 62 in the Philippines. The Fund is also providing natural disaster relief for journalists in Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam, and in Nepal after the Ghorka Valley earthquake. And the Fund offers emergency assistance to journalists facing death threats, intimidation and harassment.**

**As we recognise and celebrate the great journalism here tonight, please, spare a thought for our journalist colleagues elsewhere in the world, as we watch this video tribute produced by SBS.**