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MEAA welcomes proposed Queensland journalists' shield law

MEAA has welcomed the commitment of both the Queensland Government and Opposition to develop a shield law to protect journalists. However, MEAA will await to see the details of any legislation that will end Queensland's position as the only Australian legal jurisdiction without a shield. The commitment came after determined campaigning by Queensland journalists and MEAA.

Their campaign, which included a public petition, highlighted Queensland's failure to enact a shield law to protect journalists from prosecution for maintaining their ethical commitment to never reveal the identity of their confidential sources.

MEAA Media Queensland president Peter McCutcheon said: "For years now, both major political parties have resisted calls to develop a Queensland shield law that acknowledges journalist privilege. Without a shield, journalists are exposed to prosecution for contempt if they won't reveal their sources.

"Because of borderless digital publishing, journalists right across Australia are vulnerable to legal actions being brought against them in Queensland. They face a criminal conviction, jail or fines for ensuring the public's right to know," McCutcheon said.

The shield law proposal came after the government had proposed legislation that would impose jail or fines on journalists for reporting on corruption allegations made to the Crime and Corruption Commission during a state election. Following determined campaigning by Queensland journalists and MEAA, Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath said the legislation would be withdrawn.

MEAA looks forward to consultations on the proposed shield law. MEAA regional director Michelle Rae said: "It's crucial that a Queensland shield law provides comprehensive protection without loopholes. It's concerning that there are substantial differences in coverage among the different shield laws across Australia. That's why MEAA has been campaigning for a uniform national shield law regime that ensures no judicial system is out of step, allowing it to be exploited by plaintiffs who go 'jurisdiction shopping'.

"The Council of Attorneys-General is currently updating the uniform defamation law regime. Next, it must turn its attention to creating a loophole-free uniform national shield law that acknowledges borderless public interest journalism," she said.

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The acting Director of MEAA's Media section, Adam Portelli, said the MDA report contained several practical recommendations that would make inroads on the lack of diversity at little or no financial cost to television networks.

"The bottom line is that not only will greater diversity in newsrooms produce better and more accurate reporting about contemporary Australia, but it will help build trust and gain audiences in non-Anglo-Celtic communities," he said. "This can only be a good thing.

"More needs to be done to give people from diverse backgrounds opportunities to work in Australian television journalism, and to encourage them to apply for jobs in the industry. But paths for career progression must also be created so that people from diverse backgrounds can move into leadership positions within news organisations."