



MEDIA RELEASE

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Pezzullo reports are symptomatic of widespread attacks on press freedom in Australia: journalists' union

Reports that the Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs advocated for a new form of media censorship and to “criminalise” journalism raise disturbing concerns that must be acted upon by the Federal Government.

The comments attributed to Michael Pezzullo are symptomatic of a political and bureaucratic culture towards the public’s right to know that has pervaded Canberra for the past two decades, says the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, the union for Australian journalists.

As Secretary of Home Affairs and previously the Immigration Department, Mr Pezzullo has overseen a regime of secrecy and lack of transparency that has undermined the public’s right to know.

According to media reports, he privately urged a close confidante of two former Prime Ministers to push for the re-introduction of the notorious D-notice system of media censorship and floated the idea of criminalising public interest journalism in certain circumstances. Mr Pezzullo also privately disparaged journalists and press freedom, according to the reports.

“Under Mr Pezzullo’s watch over most of the past decade, there has been a deliberate strategy to prevent legitimate public interest journalism and to stifle the right to know,” said MEAA Media Federal President Karen Percy.

“In that time, we’ve seen fierce pushback on scrutiny of government actions. We hit a low point with the infamous Australian Federal Police raids in June 2019 of the home of a News Corp journalist and of the ABC offices in Sydney. The regular justification for these intrusions on press freedom has been reasons of ‘national security’.

“We are particularly alarmed at reports that Pezzullo advocated to reintroduce a form of D-notice regime, where media outlets must agree to government officials vetting publications. This is a dangerous and unnecessary attack on press freedom.

“D-notices have been used during wartime on rare occasions for the protection of national security. But Australia is not at war and there is no justification for their use now.

“This is just one example of a very disturbing problem that goes beyond one man. The issues are deep and wide. Successive governments have done little to improve press freedom and as a consequence we have seen Australia’s slip in world rankings.

“The reports about Mr Pezzullo must be investigated and acted upon, but if we are to see genuine improvements in press freedom in Australia it must not stop there.

“It is time for the Federal Government to seriously act on long promised reforms that will enhance the public’s right to know, including defamation law, whistleblowers, Freedom of Information and secrecy around national security.”

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