



Joint Statement - *Australia's Right to Know*

John Hartigan	Chairman and Chief Executive, News Limited
David Kirk	Chief Executive Officer, Fairfax Media
Mark Scott	Managing Director, ABC
David Leckie	CEO Network Seven and Chairman of Free TV Australia
Shaun Brown	Managing Director, SBS
Michael Anderson	CEO Austereo and Chairman, Commercial Radio Australia
Clive Marshall	CEO, AAP
Angelos Frangopoulos	CEO, Sky News

“We have joined together because we are deeply troubled by the state of free speech in Australia.

Freedom of speech is one of the fundamental pillars of a free and open society. It is as important as parliamentary democracy and the rule of law in guaranteeing the freedom and rights of all Australians.

Australians cherish the freedom to tell it like it is. Our freedom to express an opinion, honestly and openly, is under threat.

Equally, our ability to report to Australians facts about how they are governed and how our courts are administering justice is being severely hampered.

Australia now lags well behind most major democracies. The latest worldwide press freedom index, compiled by the independent organisation Reporters Without Borders, ranks Australia 35th – equal with Bulgaria and behind nations such as Bolivia (16th) and South Korea (31st).

This is not a party political issue. All Australian governments – federal and state – and all the opposition parties need to embrace urgent reform to redress the erosion of free speech in this country.

Our first priority is to commission a proper independent study of threats to free speech and expression in this country.

We will make this report widely available to the Australian public, who we believe are largely unaware of how much they are not allowed to know.

We will consult with state and federal governments, the judiciary and our public service, and urge them to be more forthcoming with information that is relevant and important to the public they serve.

We believe the Australian people should be free to make up their own minds about the processes and decisions that affect them.

Many of the laws and restrictions imposed on the public's right to know do not look sinister in isolation. But together they form a very worrying situation for this country.

A national audit of the state of free speech in Australia will be broad. Among the issues we want to explore are:

- the effectiveness of freedom of information laws – given that freedom of information is at risk of becoming an oxymoron
- the principles of open justice and the public's right to know how courts operate
- the tendency by courts to restrict public access using broad suppression orders
- the level of transparency in criminal and family law cases
- the risks that journalists and whistleblowers face jail even though they are acting in the public interest
- the impact of new sedition laws on freedom of expression in media reporting and the performing arts
- the risk that Australians can be detained without charge and reporting of such occurrences is illegal
- whether defamation laws achieve the right balance between freedom of expression and the need to protect the reputation of individuals (even allowing for recent welcome reforms that created much greater uniformity across the country)
- the need for suppression, contempt and other state based restrictions to be reformed and made uniform across the country

At the same time, we believe strongly that freedom comes with responsibility. We do not seek permission to publish or broadcast without proper respect for national secrecy or personal privacy, especially when the public interest is not served by the release of information.

All we ask is for a commitment to move towards similar levels of freedom enjoyed by the peoples and media of such countries as Ireland (joint No.1 ranking), Canada (16th), or New Zealand (19th).

Australians deserve to be trusted with information in the same way as citizens of other democracies”.

For further information:

Greg Baxter	- News Limited	(02) 9288 3242 or 0419 461 368
Bruce Wolpe	- Fairfax Media	(02) 9282 3640 or 0412 259 276
Sandy Culkoff	- ABC	(02) 8333 5155 or 0408 292 369
Julie Flynn	- FreeTV	(02) 8968 7100 or 0408 455 456
Joan Warner	- Commercial Radio	(02) 9281 6577 or 0419 410 617
Bruce Meagher	- SBS	(02) 9430 3812 or 0412 254 690
Tony Gillies	- AAP	(02) 9322 8500 or 0414 320 487
Angelos Frangopoulos	- Sky News	(02) 9886 8011 or 0413 878 590