

Australian media companies protest government attacks on press freedom

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Australia's largest media companies launched a major public campaign yesterday against a government crackdown on press freedom. All of the country's most prominent daily newspapers, including those owned by News Corp and Nine Entertainment, blacked-out their frontpages to protest government attacks on the media, including raids targeting journalists and the prosecution of whistleblowers.

The campaign, titled "Your right to know," follows Australian Federal Police raids in June targeting the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the home of Annika Smethurst, a News Corp political editor.

Since these unprecedented operations, over stories exposing alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan and plans to expand domestic spying, Coalition government ministers have refused to rule out prosecution of the journalists involved.

The threat is a clear application by the government of the "Assange precedent." The arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in London last April, and the unveiling in May of 17 US Espionage Act charges against him over lawful publishing activities, has opened the floodgates for an assault on journalists and media freedom around the world.

A press release by the campaign yesterday stated that it "shines a spotlight on the continued threats to media freedom, which hinder attempts to hold powerful people and organisations to account by intimidating and harshly punishing those who dare to speak out, often when they have nowhere else to turn."

It explained: "The move aims to push the Federal Government into lifting its veil of secrecy. It follows the passing of about 75 laws related to secrecy and spying over the past two decades which effectively criminalise journalism and penalise whistleblowing, even when they reveal wrongdoing or important information about

decisions the government is making."

"Your right to know" television advertisements have pointed to the implications of the draconian legislation for ordinary people. They have noted that under various secrecy laws and regulations, whistleblowers are prevented from disclosing to journalists information ranging from abuses in aged-care facilities to government surveillance measures.

The ABC's managing director David Anderson has warned that "Australia is at risk of becoming the world's most secretive democracy." Hugh Marks of Nine Entertainment stated: "This is much bigger than the media. It's about defending the basic right of every Australian to be properly informed about the important decisions the government is making in their name."

In articles and statements on Twitter, journalists have highlighted the oppressive conditions they face. The *Australian's* national security editor Paul Malley, for instance, wrote: "I'd love to be able to tell you about my most recent experience reporting on a sensitive national security matter, but if I did I might end up in jail."

The campaign has been launched amid a series of whistleblower prosecutions.

David McBride, a former military lawyer who leaked documents revealing Australian army illegality in Afghanistan, faces years in prison for violating secrecy offenses. Witness K, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service agent, and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery are being prosecuted for detailing Australian spying on East Timor. Richard Boyle, an Australian Tax Office employee who blew the whistle on abuses of power, including aggressive debt collection practices, has been charged with 66 offenses.

The media corporations, along with the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the union which covers journalists, are demanding a series of legislative changes.

These include the right to contest police warrants

covering journalists and media organisations; public interest exemptions for journalists under security laws; whistleblower protections; new limitations of which documents governments can label as secret; a “properly functioning” freedom of information system and the easing of defamation laws.

The campaign expresses a groundswell of hostility among journalists to authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing evidence of government wrongdoing and muzzling the press.

The concerns of the media conglomerates are very different. For decades, they have functioned as partners of governments and the intelligence agencies, willingly suppressing information about a raft of “national security” issues, including Australia’s frontline role in the US confrontation with China and the persecution of Assange.

Their opposition to the government measures is based on fears that recent legislation could undermine their lucrative business models and open them up to costly and damaging legal actions. Many of the statements from the corporate publications have been plaintive appeals to restore the cosy, decades-long relationship between the establishment media and the authorities.

The tepid character of the official campaign was summed up by an editorial in the *Age* yesterday which declared that the publication was not “looking for an opportunity to put national security at risk.”

It stated: “The *Age* does not believe raids on journalists should be banned. But we argue police should make their case to a senior judge and any search warrant issued be deemed in the national interest.” The newspaper called only for the “right balance” to be struck between “transparency and common sense.”

For their part, senior opposition Labor MPs have cynically sought to exploit the campaign. At a parliamentary inquiry yesterday, Labor Senator Kristina Keneally waved copies of the blacked-out newspapers at representatives of the Australian Federal Police.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese made a pile of the papers in the House of Representatives. He tweeted that he was “Proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with Australian journalists fighting to protect freedom of the press.”

Journalists and defenders of democratic rights should reject this posturing with the contempt that it deserves. Successive Labor governments have imposed draconian “national security” legislation, especially on the bogus pretext of the “war on terror.”

In opposition, Labor has given bipartisan support to a series of repressive laws. This included the passage, last year, of unprecedented foreign interference and espionage legislation.

Along with expanding jail terms for whistleblowers, the laws are explicitly aimed at creating the conditions for the prosecution of journalists. They make it a criminal offense to “deal with” information that “harms” “national security.” “Deal with” is defined to cover a long list of activities: “collect,” “possess,” “make a record of,” “copy,” “alter,” “conceal,” “communicate,” “publish” and “make available.”

The bipartisan crackdown also demonstrates the need for journalists to break the protracted silence of the Australian media over the persecution of Assange. In line with the support of the political establishment for the US-led vendetta against the WikiLeaks founder, the corporate publications have for many years blacked out information on his dire plight, while repeating the slanders concocted by the US intelligence agencies to discredit him.

In an opinion piece published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday, Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange’s lawyers, outlined the direct relationship between the persecution of her client and the attacks on press freedom in Australia.

Robinson wrote that publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had acknowledged that the US indictment against Assange “criminalises journalistic practices used by those newspapers to report in the public interest.”

The lawyer continued: “Not only has Australia refused to stand up for Assange and condemn this attack on free speech, the government has run with the precedent at home.

“There is no denying the parallels with the AFP raids on Australian journalists and the Assange indictment: both involve receipt and publication of classified information about Afghanistan, including evidence of possible US and Australian war crimes.”



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