

OPENING REMARKS

CAMERON DICK MP ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY 2010 CONFERENCE

Sunday 2 May 2010

Acknowledgments:

- Traditional owners of the land on which we meet, which in Brisbane are the Jaggera and the Turrubul people, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present
- Your Excellency Dr Penelope Wensley, Governor of Queensland
- Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General, UNESCO
- Professor Paul Greenfield, Vice-Chancellor, University of Queensland
- Professor John McMillan, Commonwealth Ombudsman
- Mr Aidan White, General Secretary, International Federation of Journalists
- Mr Chris Warren, President, Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance
- Professor Michael Bromley, Head of the School of Journalism and Communication within the University of Queensland
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps in Queensland
- International journalists
- Distinguished guests and delegates
- Ladies and gentlemen.

INTRODUCTION

It is my very pleasant duty this morning to welcome you all – on this brilliant Brisbane morning – to Queensland and to Australia, especially those who are visiting here for the first time.

I am here today on behalf of the Queensland Premier, the Honourable Anna Bligh, who regrets that she was unable to be here but has asked me to pass on her warmest welcome to you.

Queensland is delighted to be hosting this very important international conference, and the Premier sends her very best wishes for your discussions and deliberations.

PRESS FREEDOM

Freedom of the press, like freedom of speech and even freedom of thought, cannot be taken for granted.

Indeed, they are in short supply in many parts of the world even today.

These freedoms, which are intertwined, require constant vigilance and defence, because they are under constant threat of erosion or removal in so many places.

History tells us that even in democracies, these freedoms have been threatened – going back even as far as Classical Athens, where Socrates was executed for ridiculing the gods.

Even in Athens, the cradle of democracy, freedom was not safe.

The links between freedom of speech and freedom of the press had their genesis in the 15th century when Gutenberg invented the printing press, which made the written word accessible to a much wider audience than ever before.

It wasn't long before the press and movable type had spread throughout Europe – with William Caxton, for instance, setting up England's first printing works in London in 1476.

A few decades later, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the All Saints Church at Wittenberg, protesting against what he regarded as corruptions within the church.

That event unleashed the Protestant Reformation and the political upheaval that consumed Europe for almost two hundred years.

The combination of these two events – the questioning of conventional religious doctrine and easier access to the written word – created a situation that society had not had to deal with previously.

For what was probably the first time in history, there was a growing awareness within the general population that they had a right to more information.

Not surprisingly, this was a situation that immediately prompted governments and organisations of the Establishment to suppress the pamphlets and newsletters that were the forerunners of the first newspapers.

So for almost as long as the printed word has been available, there has been tension between governments and publishers as to how far written information could go.

RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT

Fast forward to the 21st century and the public's demand to have access to information is as strong as ever.

It is a demand that is certainly recognised here in Queensland.

Last year, the Queensland Parliament passed the *Right to Information Act 2009*.

This Act, which replaced our state's Freedom of Information Act, has adopted a different approach to the release of government information to the public.

Our new approach encourages government agencies to find reasons to release information, rather than reasons to withhold it.

Under the new Act, the public has a statutory right to access information held by the government.

Furthermore, the government has adopted a "push" model for access to information, meaning that information should be actively and routinely pushed into the public domain.

The Queensland Act features several extremely progressive elements, including:

- a reduction in the number of exemptions for Cabinet material
- the expansion of the role of the Information Commissioner, who I know will be attending this conference, and
- the shortening of the Cabinet secrecy provisions from 30 years to 20.

This new regime has certainly given the public – including the press – greater access to government documents.

Rarely does a week go by now when Queensland media outlets don't publish or broadcast a right-to-information "exclusive" – reporting material that they have received as a result of the new information laws.

While these reports occasionally result in some uncomfortable moments for the government, they are a necessary and vital part of a society where freedom of the press is valued, cherished and supported.

They simply reflect the rights and expectations of a modern, democratic society in the 21st century.

CHALLENGES

But there are numerous challenges confronting our right to know.

We are still coming to terms with the role and impact of the Internet on the dissemination of information.

The globalisation of the news media and the compression of the news cycle also poses a multitude of questions about the quality, timeliness and accuracy of the information available to us.

And there are still threats across the globe to the work done by media organisations – tragically highlighted by the fact that more than 1000 journalists have been killed while doing their job in the past dozen years.

For those of us who live in mature democracies, where so many people often take for granted the liberties and freedoms that others yearn for, this figure is a stark and tragic reminder of the preciousness, and fragility, of those freedoms.

Those of us who have the privilege to engage in public discourse each day; in great public debates, each day; must not bear false witness to those who struggle mightily for that same chance, for that same opportunity.

Let the memory of those who have struggled in vain to seek the truth, and have been denied that right – and, on many occasions, have been persecuted, tortured, imprisoned and killed in that struggle – be the lodestar for those of us who live in true, open and democratic societies.

But these challenges should not deter us – they should only make us more determined to defend the freedoms that can often be taken for granted.

The virtues of a free press were extolled by former US President John F Kennedy. He was a man who loved the written and spoken word, as does the current United States President Barack Obama.

President Kennedy said:

“We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies and competitive values.

“For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.”

These are sentiments I – and I’m sure everyone in this room – share...but it is a sad fact that they are hardly universal.

For these views to become more predominant throughout our world, we need the continuing courage, insight and conviction of people such as yourselves.

I hope your discussions over this three-day conference further equip you to continue your good work in the world.

Thank you, and once again on behalf of the Premier, welcome to Queensland.

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