



Friday, 18 November 2016

Open Government Partnership Australia
Public Data Branch
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
ogp@pmc.gov.au

Re: Draft National Action Plan

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) is the trade union and industry advocate for Australia's creative professionals, including journalists.

MEAA supports the submission lodged by the Steering Committee of the Australian Open Government Partnership Network.

AS MEAA has chronicled in its annual State of Press Freedom in Australia reports (see www.meaa.org), there has been a disturbing trend being displayed for government to frustrate legitimate scrutiny of government by the public and by the media on behalf of the community.

MEAA has always argued that open and transparent government should mean that the default position of information should be freedom of access. The vast bulk of information generated by government should be subject to scrutiny and evaluation. Government actions should be subject to consultation, consideration and debate. Restrictions on information are anathema to democracy and by extension to the principles of press freedom.

Recent statements (<http://meaa.io/2g0MI44>) coming from the highest levels of the Public Service as well as from Ministers suggest that there are increasing efforts to shroud government decision-making and activities in secrecy and hide actions from the public, sometimes extolling the flimsiest of excuses to do so. That this is done in a conscious effort to undermine Freedom of Information requirements is particularly disturbing.

These comments suggest a mindset is evolving that believes some aspects of "risk management" should involve minimising the risk of exposure; that the public and journalists in particular are not entitled to seek information; and that deliberations of government on matters of public policy are best kept suppressed. This is wrong. It is not in keeping with a healthy functioning democracy.

MEAA believes that government should be open, transparent, responsive, responsible and accountable. To do otherwise is not good government.

MEAA welcomes the opportunity to develop a National Action Plan to forge a framework for open, transparent and accessible government.

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MEAA particularly echoes the submission's comments and concerns regarding:

- the growing number of secrecy provisions in legislation;
- the lack of resources (and support) for the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner;
- the need for genuine, substantial whistleblower protections (particularly given the increasingly harsh penalties for disclosures of information that punish the whistleblower and go after the journalists who work with them – not least by secretly using metadata retention to pursue journalists' confidential sources);
- the need for a comprehensive approach to data collection, management, storage, integrity, access and protection; and
- a thorough review of freedom of information laws – and attitudes – within government.

We believe there is much work to be done but as the submission demonstrates, there is a great willingness among civil society for progress to be made to create genuine open government.

MEAA commends the submission to you.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Murphy
CEO