



PRESS RELEASE

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Australia: Report Highlights Free Speech Concerns

ARTICLE 19 welcomes the launch of the Australian Right to Know Coalition's *Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia* which underlines an increasing culture of secrecy and legislation limiting freedom of expression.

Australia's Right to Know Coalition was formed in May 2007 by a group of media firms and public broadcasters to highlight the erosion of freedom of expression and freedom of the media in Australia.

The *Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia* launched last week is a broad examination of various dimensions of free speech in Australia. It contains chapters on access to information, the protection of whistleblowers, freedom of information, anti-terrorism and sedition, the justice system, privacy and defamation.

Among its many important findings, the report underlines the government's lack of accountability due to a poorly functioning access to information regime, the 500 or so pieces of legislation containing "secrecy provisions", the proliferation of suppression orders issued by courts, the lack of uniform and adequate legal protection for whistleblowers and the negative impact of tough anti-terrorism legislation, findings which in part echo concerns expressed previously by ARTICLE 19. As a result, Australia is now ranked 28th out of 169 countries in the 2007 international press freedom index by Reporters Without Borders. This fall from its 12th place in 2002 is largely attributable to recent anti-terrorism measures in Australia, in particular to the practice of unlawful phone-tapping and pressure on journalists to surrender their sources.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Australian Government to take note of the findings of this report and to strengthen respect for international standards of freedom of expression and access to information. In particular, we call on the authorities to:

- Ensure effective legal protection of whistleblowers who disclose information in the public interest, and of the right of journalists to protect their sources;
- Review the overbroad definitions of "terrorist act" and sedition in federal law;
- Take measures to reduce delays in the processing of freedom of information requests, and lessen the fees charged for public interest requests.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- For more information, please contact Catrina Pickering, Programme Officer, catrina@article19.org, +44 20 7278 9292.
- The *Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia* is available online at <http://www.news.com.au/files/freespeechinaustralia.pdf>.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.