



15 March 2013

Statement from Don Voelte AO, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Seven West Media on Media Reform Proposals

This is a critical time for Australia's democratic freedoms. Just because newspapers don't write what you like is not a reason to regulate them. Every member of parliament needs to step back and carefully consider their decision on the government's proposed legislation on media reforms.

Their vote will be telling. It will determine whether or not this country can be assured of a free press. It is a free press that has been core to Australia's values as a democracy: freedom of speech and expression and holding governments to account, and healthy and vigorous debate on issues that impact all Australians.

This is not legislation that will build a strong and vigorous media delivering news, information and content to all Australians. It is a blunt attempt to impose government influence on what the media reports on any issue. It is simply not correct to describe this as light touch regulation on any level. The print media will be wholly dependent on the consent of a single individual whose subjective views of what constitutes community standards are not subject to any review or appeal. That person is appointed by the Minister. If that person believes that the standards applied by a news media organization are not sufficient, they can in effect withdraw the protections afforded by the Privacy Act, making it impossible for journalists within the member organisations to practice their craft. And there is no appeal and no review of these decisions. The government's draconian attempt to control the press stands us apart from any other democratic society. It is a sobering prospect we face right now: a press whose ultimate judge and jury is the government.

The dynamics of the media sector have changed markedly and things are not easy. Media – across broadcast television, publishing and online – is facing significant structural and commercial challenges. There is significant competition; there are significant demands as all media migrate their content to new delivery platforms to meet changing consumer demands. And these challenges are being faced in an uncertain economy and poor consumer confidence which is significantly impacting revenues for all media companies.

The coming couple of years will define how we maintain, nurture and ensure a vibrant diverse media landscape that is committed to delivering content relevant to all Australians and to reflect our beliefs and values. We are meeting the challenges of an uncertain economy and changing how we do business. What the industry doesn't need is a government curtailing free speech and putting a gun to our heads in a ham-fisted attempt to neutralize commentary and expression of opinion.

In one bludgeoning attempt, the government is seeking to neuter, negate and manage what was a free press. It will seek to determine what it believes is right. What the government believes is right for Australians in media is not the way democracy works. The people – our viewers, our readers – are the ones who always decide what they wish to read or watch and then make their own decisions.