

20/11/2020 01:31:09 PM

Hon Kevin Rudd
L36/1 Eagle Street
Brisbane
QLD 4000
AU

s 11C(1)(a)

ATT:663141 Commission of Inquiry

Dear Prime Minister,

Please find attached a letter from the Hon Kevin Rudd AC, 26th Prime Minister of Australia.

Should you wish to contact Mr Rudd, his adviser s 11C(1)(a) is available on s 11C(1)(a)

Best wishes,
Office of Hon Kevin Rudd AC
26th Prime Minister of Australia



THE HONOURABLE KEVIN RUDD AC

26th Prime Minister of Australia

20 November 2020

Dear Prime Minister Morrison,

You may be aware of a petition tabled in the House of Representatives last week, calling for a Royal Commission to ensure a strong, diverse news media to underpin the future of Australia's democracy.

The petition garnered more than 500,000 signatures in only four weeks, making it the single largest electronic petition ever submitted to the Australian Parliament.

The petition, known formally as EN1938, read:

Our democracy depends on diverse sources of reliable, accurate and independent news. But media ownership is becoming more concentrated alongside new business models that encourage deliberately polarising and politically manipulated news.

We are especially concerned that Australia's print media is overwhelmingly controlled by News Corporation, founded by Fox News billionaire Rupert Murdoch, with around two-thirds of daily newspaper readership. This power is routinely used to attack opponents in business and politics by blending editorial opinion with news reporting. Australians who hold contrary views have felt intimidated into silence. These facts chill free speech and undermine public debate. Powerful monopolies are also emerging online, including Facebook and Google.

We are deeply concerned by: mass-sackings of news journalists; digital platforms impacting on media diversity and viability; Nine Entertainment's takeover of the Melbourne Age and Sydney Morning Herald; News Corp's acquisition (and then closure) of more than 200 smaller newspapers, undermining regional and local news; attempts to replace AAP Newswire with News Corp's alternative; and relentless attacks on the ABC's independence and funding. Professional journalists further have legitimate concerns around unjust searches, potential prosecution, whistle-blower protection, official secrecy and dispute resolution that should be comprehensively addressed.

Only a Royal Commission would have the powers and independence to investigate threats to media diversity, and recommend policies to ensure optimal diversity across all platforms to help guarantee our nation's democratic future.

We therefore ask the House to support the establishment of such a Royal Commission to ensure the strength and diversity of Australian news media.

This is a pivotal time for our democracy. How we respond to these emerging challenges will determine whether Australians can depend on a thriving, diverse media to hold public officials to account. It will also determine whether future citizens can rely on factual and accurate reporting, separated from the opinion of editors and publishers, on which to make informed voting decisions.

Given the clear and widespread support for this initiative across Australia, I would appreciate your views on constituting a commission of inquiry into the future of media diversity, as respectfully requested by these half-million petitioners.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Rudd'.

Kevin Rudd



PAUL FLETCHER MP

Federal Member for Bradfield
Minister for Communications,
Urban Infrastructure,
Cities & the Arts

MC21-001581

The Hon Kevin Rudd AC
GPO Box 228
Brisbane QLD 4001

Dear Mr Rudd

Kevin

I refer to your letter of 20 November 2020 to the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, regarding Petition EN1938 which calls for a Royal Commission to ensure a strong, diverse news media to underpin the future of Australia's democracy. Your letter has been forwarded to me for reply as I have portfolio responsibility for this matter.

This petition was considered by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions and presented in the House of Representatives on 9 November 2020. In line with its usual practice, the Committee referred the petition to me as the relevant portfolio Minister for advice. On 30 January 2021, I provided my written response to the Chair of the Committee indicating that the Australian Government will not be advising the Governor-General to initiate a Royal Commission into Australian news media.

The Government supports a diverse and sustainable media sector and recognises that quality news and public interest journalism play an important role in the functioning of Australian society and democracy.

As you would be aware, the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* contains a number of rules regarding the control and diversity of media ownership in Australia. These rules support a diverse media sector by limiting the number of media operations that can be controlled by a person in a licence area.

In addition to ownership restrictions, the diversity and sustainability of news media is also contingent on financial viability. The Government recognises that media companies have been facing challenging market conditions with declining circulation/audience numbers and difficult advertising conditions. The sharp downturn in advertising revenue across the sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased those challenges.

The Government acted decisively in the national interest to implement a range of measures to help Australian media businesses during COVID-19, including:

- **Investing in regional journalism** – A \$55 million Public Interest News Gathering program for commercial television and radio broadcasters and newspapers in regional Australia. This has provided funding to 107 regional publishers and broadcasters who applied for the program. In addition, the Government has provided \$5 million to the Australian Associated Press Limited Newswire under the program.
- **Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund** – The Government brought forward the release of \$5 million from the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund. The Fund's 2020 round has provided funding to 41 regional and small publishers producing public interest journalism.
- **Tax relief** – A 12-month waiver of spectrum tax for commercial television and radio broadcasters worth \$41 million.

On 27 November 2020, the Government announced the next stage of its media reform program with the release of a Media Reform Green Paper. The Green Paper outlines a set of proposals to improve the sustainability of Australian media businesses and the range and quality of services and content available to all Australians. The Government welcomes an open dialogue with stakeholders during the consultation period, which closes 23 May 2021.

Further, on 25 February 2021, the Government secured passage of the Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020 (the News Media Bargaining Code) through Parliament. The News Media Bargaining Code is world leading regulatory reform to address the bargaining power imbalances between large digital platforms and Australian news businesses over critical issues, including remuneration.

While we do not support your calls for a Royal Commission, the Government is actively engaged in ensuring the sustainability of a strong and diverse media sector through those actions we have taken.

I have copied the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, into this correspondence.

Yours sincerely



Paul Fletcher

10/4/2021