

CORRUPTION FIGHTER TO AUDIT FREE SPEECH

*Nicolas Perpetch
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A former corruption commissioner appointed to investigate free speech in Australia on behalf of the country's major media groups says she can guarantee her impartiality.

The newly-formed Australia's Right to Know Coalition today announced Irene Moss, the former commissioner of NSW's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), will chair its audit of media freedom.

Ms Moss was the NSW Ombudsman for five years and a former federal Race Discrimination Commissioner with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

"In each of those roles there are vigorous kinds of guidelines that I've adhered to, which are that of integrity and impartiality and appropriate reporting. I think all that experience will help me in this job," Ms Moss said.

The media coalition - which includes AAP, the ABC, News Ltd and Fairfax - has said the 500 laws that limit the release of public information are a "very significant threat" to free speech.

The companies claim court suppression orders, rejection of Freedom of Information applications, anti-terrorism laws and increased government and police intervention have severely eroded press freedom in recent years.

Their claims are backed by the international journalism watchdog, Reporters Without Borders, which ranks Australia at No 35 on its worldwide press freedom index.

Ms Moss said her job was to find out exactly where Australia stands in terms of free speech.

"It's a sort of a state of the nation of free speech in Australia today - should we be very worried or not?" she said.

"It's too early for me to make definite pronouncements, but from the rankings and from the examples put forward by the media alliance, it does give me cause for concern."

Ms Moss said she would talk to the media about what they believed were the barriers to seeking out information and reporting.

"We'll need to look at those prohibitions and see how serious they are. Are they well justified or not? Are they real barriers to the press being able to do their proper job?" she said.

Expected shield laws to protect journalists from revealing confidential sources were a step in the right direction but needed to be applied in all states, she said.

Ms Moss said she has spoken to her media employers about the independence of her report.

"I have basically said, 'It's my report and if there are issues in my report you're not comfortable with because you don't agree with them ... I reserve the right to report in that way', and they've been accepting of that."

The report was due to be finished in September or October, she said.

Source: <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,21785763-5003402,00.html>