RSF CALLS FOR OVERHAUL OF FOI LAWS

Australia: call for overhaul of freedom of information laws after disappointing decision by the High Court.

Pacific Media Watch
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PARIS (RSF/Pacific Media Watch): Reporters Without Borders today called on Australia's government and parliament to urgently amend its laws on the right and access to information in order to better protect press freedom after a High Court ruling confirmed the extent to which these rights and freedoms are curtailed.

"It is regrettable in a democracy that a government can so easily reject a journalist's request for access to information that is in the public interest," the press freedom organisation said. "It is even more regrettable that the courts uphold the government's ability to evade the need for transparency."

Reporters Without Borders added that it was supporting calls from the Australian Press Council and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance for an overhaul of the existing legislation.

In a three-to-two majority decision, the High Court of Australia ruled on 6 September that the treasury department was right not to supply The Australian daily newspaper with the information about income tax which the newspaper's freedom of information editor, Michael McKinnon, requested a few years ago under the 2002 Freedom of Information Act.

The authorities are empowered under the access to information laws to reject a request from a news organisation if they considered it is against "the public interest." The treasury minister twice blocked McKinnon's request for documents relating to tax policy.

The Australian Press Council said the high court's decision would give the authorities a "fresh impetus to suppress information that is embarrassing or politically inconvenient." The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance said the existing legislation "provided several barriers for journalists seeking access to non-personal information."

Source: http://www.pmw.c2o.org/2006/aust5009.html