

No News is Bad News

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No news is bad news Australia's free press is on life support

Unlawful police raids, secret trials, journalists facing prosecution or contempt charges, a new and crippling round of redundancies in the media and a stalled parliamentary inquiry into the free press ... join the dots and it's plain that last year's uproar over the public's [right to know](#) has failed to stop a drift towards censorship that threatens Australia's democracy. "The government as yet has not responded in any positive way to the right to know campaign," says shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus, a member of the joint committee on intelligence and security, which is conducting the free press inquiry. "It has not committed to any kind of legislative reform. We need to reshape the law of our country to make sure that journalists can't be prosecuted for simply doing their job."

Let's look back at just this week: On Tuesday, we [learnt](#) that more than 20 publications and 19 journalists face trial for allegedly breaching suppression orders when Cardinal George Pell was initially convicted of historic child sex abuse. On Wednesday, the federal police [ruled out](#) laying charges against News Corp journalist Annika Smethurst, whose home was raided last year after she revealed the federal government wanted to give the Australian Signals Directorate the right to spy on Australians. It is good news that Smethurst can relax, but, in a confusing ruling that did nothing for press freedom, the High Court has [allowed](#) police to keep the material they obtained from her home. And ABC journalists Dan Oakes and Sam Clark are *still* facing potential prosecution for investigating allegations of war crimes by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, after a separate raid by the AFP on the broadcaster's Ultimo headquarters last year. That raid sparked headlines worldwide, with the *New York Times* [describing](#) Australia as possibly "the world's most secretive democracy". Yesterday, News Corp announced that printing would stop at 112 local and regional newspapers, with the loss of hundreds of jobs, prompting *Crikey* publisher Eric Beecher and editor Peter Fray to [write](#) [\$] that Australian news journalism had "never seen a day as black as today".

Meanwhile, preliminary hearings in the outrageous trial of former ACT attorney-general Bernard Collaery – the lawyer whose client, Witness K, blew the whistle on Australia's criminal spying operation against East Timor more than a decade ago – have proceeded in secret in the ACT Supreme Court all week. Protesters calling for open justice have been stationed outside, and *Crikey* [reported](#) [\$] that ex-foreign minister Gareth Evans, retired admiral Chris Barrie and former ambassador John McCarthy were all in attendance. All three had signed affidavits arguing that the trial should be in an open court, as did former Timor-Leste leaders Xanana Gusmão and José Ramos-Horta. Lawyers from Xenophon Davis were told to delete pictures taken outside the court of individuals appearing for the defence, and [tweeted](#): "The darkness descends. The secret trial continues."

The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security [inquiry](#) into the "impact of the exercise of law enforcement and intelligence powers on the freedom of the press" held high-profile hearings in Sydney and Canberra, and took evidence from a phalanx of media

bosses across the ABC, News Corp, Nine Entertainment and other media. Since then nothing has happened, although the committee is expected to report by the end of June. “There’s an urgent need for legislative reform to guarantee press freedom in Australia,” says shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus. “The report of the intelligence committee has been too long in coming. The wait has provided an excuse for the government to disengage from the issue.”

Meanwhile the prime minister’s office feels free to send ABC News director Gaven Morris an email with the subject line “COMPLAINT”, after an investigation revealed that Australians’ data obtained via the COVIDSafe app could be sent overseas. And freedom-of-information laws remain broken. That all suits Morrison, whom Dreyfus describes as the “king of secrecy”, famous for refusing to discuss “on-water matters” or answer “Canberra-bubble questions”.

As a result of the winnowing commercial realities of technological disruption, instead of a freer press we get ever-fewer media stars put on ever-higher pedestals. They grow ever-more influential and are co-opted into the powerful elite, tilting more towards access journalism and less towards independent scrutiny and investigation. At its worst, the end result is something like this morning’s [love-in](#) between Prime Minister Scott Morrison and retiring shock-jock Alan Jones, who stood up for farmers against coal and gas, but will be remembered for his cash-for-comment scandal and fomenting the Cronulla riots, as well as for his climate denialism and the misogynist bile he spat out at powerful women including prime ministers Julia Gillard and Jacinda Ardern. Pressed on whether brave Tasmanian naval gunner Teddy Sheehan should be reconsidered for a Victoria Cross, Morrison talked through all the wrinkles of this latest hard-right culture war and reluctantly said no. The unapologetically partisan Jones fell upon him:

I want to say one thing to our listeners. People may not believe this, but the prime minister has no idea I’m going to ask that question. The prime minister has never been the defence minister. He’s never been the defence personnel minister. He’s been the treasurer, and the prime minister, and this is the key to all the young people out there: how does he manage? Because he’s across the detail, and you can’t succeed anywhere if you’re not across the detail. This prime minister won an election because he was across the detail. And that question that I asked him here, I had no idea that he could even provide an answer – some people would say “Alan, oh I’ll take that on board, and I’ll come back to you”. But you just heard the answer – comprehensive, understands it all. It’s to your great credit.

Vomit. Jones at least got one thing right: as a listener, I don’t believe him.