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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Broadcasting Legislation Amendment
(News Media Diversity) Bill 2013**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 19 March 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Pyne, Christopher, MP

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Mr PYNE (Sturt—Manager of Opposition Business) (20:20): I was not planning on speaking at this stage of the debate on the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (News Media Diversity) Bill 2013, but, given some of the confusion about the chaos that this government has created tonight—

The SPEAKER: Order! The Manager of Opposition Business will not put that to the chamber. There were procedural matters before the House.

Mr PYNE: It is not just the chaos of the last 20 minutes, Speaker; it is the chaos that has infected this parliament over the government's attempts to muzzle the media through these media regulations they are introducing into the parliament and proposing to pass in the House tonight. That is the chaos to which I am referring.

The government have so lost their way that they are now in the parliament tonight planning to gag a debate about freedom of speech.

The government have sunk so low that not only are they introducing bills that they intend to pass tonight that muzzle a free press in this country and introduce the most draconian media laws in the history of the Commonwealth outside wartime but they are also planning tonight to gag that debate, to apply the guillotine to stop the debate on the government's media regulation. I know it is amazing and surprising that the government could have sunk so low, could have become so unscrupulous, that they would actually be seeking to gag a debate about freedom of speech, but that is the plan of the government tonight in this House.

Why would the government have sunk so low that it would be planning on gagging a debate on freedom of speech in this parliament? I will tell you why. Because everything the Prime Minister and the government do is about hour-by-hour survival. These media laws were dreamt up by the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. They were shanghaied through the cabinet process. We know that half the members of the cabinet were not even present when the debate was held. Many of them did not even know the debate was going to be held. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has made it clear that he did not even know there was going to be a debate in cabinet about these media laws. The minister opposite, the Minister for Health, was stuck with me on a plane in Sydney. The Cabinet Secretary was stuck with me on the same plane. The Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth was stuck with me on the same plane in Sydney. None of them made the cabinet debate. We know from the reports of that cabinet—because the government leaks like a sieve—that members of the cabinet did not even have briefing notes. They had an oral briefing from the minister for communications. They were not given the opportunity to examine what the government was proposing because all this Prime Minister wanted to do, in the dying days of this government, was introduce another grand distraction to keep the member for Griffith at bay for another week or two. But I doubt that will occur, because these media laws will be the final rock upon which this prime ministership breaks. This will be the final rock into which the Prime Minister sails the Labor Party ship before the next election.

Who could have believed the number of enemies this government has made over the last two and a half years, whether it is live cattle exporters, right through to, now, the media industry in this country, by trying to introduce the most draconian measures to regulate the press outside wartime in Australia? We know that the Prime Minister shanghaied the cabinet last Tuesday to introduce these laws. We know that the caucus did not get any opportunity to debate these changes or the process by which the minister for communications decided to introduce these laws.

And to the members opposite who are being so voluble in attacking me during my contribution, at least I have the decency to stand up here at the dispatch box and argue my case. Not one member of the Labor back bench is prepared to defend these laws. The members of the Labor back bench and front bench were pulled from the speakers list today so that these bills would go through the parliament tonight, to try again for another day to stave off the inevitable replacement of the Prime Minister by the member for Griffith, or the member for Hotham,

or the member for Isaacs, or anyone other than this Prime Minister the Labor Party will cling to like a drowning sailor to try to save this disastrous failing government.

Mr Dreyfus: We can hear you; you don't have to shout!

Mr PYNE: Well, why don't you speak, Rumpole! Why isn't any member of the Labor Party—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member will use the proper titles of those opposite.

Mr PYNE: I will. I challenge all the members of the Labor Party to come into the chamber tonight and defend this grotesque invasion of freedom of speech in this country.

Not only was the caucus railroaded but the committee process for the biggest change to media regulation in this country was limited to a one-day hearing in Canberra this week. There was no proper process and no proper investigation. We know that the government have gotten these things wrong time and time and time again. They need to go through the proper committee process if they are going to get the legislation right. They are chattering away on the other side of the dispatch box like a couple of twittering birds in a nest. Get up and defend the government's media regulation rather than coming in here like a coward and interrupting other members while they are speaking. If you want to speak, speak.

The final denouement of this legislation is to railroad these bills through the parliament tonight with a grubby deal with the crossbenchers in this hung parliament. All week the crossbenchers have come out and paraded themselves in front of the media doing their dance of a thousand veils for the press about how they were going to vote against this legislation or how, in order to vote for it, they needed extra inducements in this place for their electorates. They paraded themselves for the press gallery. They did their dance of a thousand veils, but, in the end, what did I predict on Monday morning? I predicted they would roll over and vote for the Prime Minister's legislation. And there is one reason: not one of the crossbenchers wants an election. Only the member for Kennedy and the member for Denison would be re-elected right now if there were an election, and they know it. They have much more support in their electorates than the member for Lyne, the member for New England, the member for Melbourne, the member for Fisher or the member for Dobell. So they have done a grubby deal with the government to stave off an election—

Mr Stephen Jones: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. We might be approaching 'cracker night' in Canberra, but this is ridiculous. Is he going to be relevant to the legislation before the House? When is he going to be relevant?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The speaker will refer to the legislation before the House.

Mr PYNE: Mr Deputy Speaker Lyons, you might want to talk to the Leader of the House about the arrangements between the opposition and the government, because it has been made very clear to us in the opposition that because of the chaotic nature of the treatment of these bills in the parliament tonight members of the opposition have been told that they can speak to all of these bills in a cognate debate, in spite of the fact that we will be voting on them separately. So I am speaking to the bills, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am talking about freedom of speech.

One of the most important attributes of a successful democracy is the freedom of the press. We have not always been grateful for the press coverage we have had as politicians in this country. Both sides of parliament have had their fair share of opprobrium from the free press. But the free press is one of the most important structures in our democracy.

The press—whether it is Fairfax, Seven, Nine, Ten or News Limited—are united against this attack on their freedom to publish without reservation, without fear or favour. The *Daily Telegraph* had a two-page spread today about what the newspapers will look like in the future under the Public Interest Media Advocate. They had a satire of what the press would look like if this legislation were passed, and it made for very sad reading. I read it, and I could have been reading *Pravda*; I could have been reading a North Korean newspaper. And that is the future for this country if the Labor government get their way: if they suborn the cabinet, if they ignore the caucus, if they demean the committee process and if they gag the parliament.

If this legislation passes tonight and then passes the Senate, the future for this country is in the hands of the committee of public safety, otherwise known as the Public Interest Media Advocate. In fact, the grubby deal this government has done with the crossbenchers is not to have a government-only-appointed public interest media advocate; it is to have a panel. It is sounding even more like the committee of public safety. It will be a panel of three, just like the committee of public safety, who will decide who is appointed the new media tsar, the PIMA, who will determine the content of publications in this country, and who will determine the public interest.

I know that former senator Bob Brown is looking for a job. He is the kind of person that the Labor Party would want to have as the Public Interest Media Advocate. He, too, hates News Limited, just as the minister for communications and the Prime Minister do.

The Prime Minister has been threatening News Limited for months. She hates the press coverage she gets. She hates the truth that the press talk about this government and this Prime Minister. She has been threatening News Limited for months. Last year she said that News Limited had questions to answer. Yet she is yet to put one of those questions to the parliament. She has yet to even argue in favour of her media regulation. We have not had the UK phone hacking scandal that Britain saw last year; we have had nothing even approaching it. She has not been able to detail one question that News Limited is supposed to have been able to answer. She has not been able to describe what mischief this legislation is designed to deal with or to remove. All she has done is to come in here with her hate and her bile and her viciousness towards the free press and say, 'Before this government falls, let's introduce media regulation so we can muzzle the free press.'

I know there are good Labor people on that side of the House. They are few and far between, but I know they are there. And why are they going along with this extraordinary legislation? Why are they supporting legislation that would make Lenin proud? Lenin, when he was in control of the Soviet Union in 1920, said: 'Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticised?' It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government? And I see the member for Werriwa is nodding. Thank you, the member for Werriwa.

Mr Laurie Ferguson interjecting—

Mr PYNE: The member for Werriwa is nodding—he agrees with Vladimir Lenin in 1920! He cannot understand why the government did not act sooner: 'Why didn't the government act sooner?'

But I can tell you one thing: the opposition will oppose this legislation root and branch. We will fight it right through to the election day. It will not just be that we will abolish the carbon tax and the mining tax; we will bring back integrity and transparency to government, respect the parliament and have a Prime Minister who leads by example in his treatment of the parliament and the press. We will repeal this legislation. We will do everything we have to do to bring back a free press in this country. And the government will wear this around their necks like a millstone, right through to 8 o'clock on election night when the results are finally announced and far too many members, amongst them good members, on the Labor side will lose their seats, because of one thing—because of their inane desire to support, their obsession with supporting, Julia Gillard as Prime Minister through to the election.

You are laughing at that, Member for Reid, but you have not supported the Prime Minister for a very long time. I know you think that is terribly funny. But, unfortunately, you are being tarred with the same brush as every other one of your colleagues.

Mr Murphy: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I have been verbally by the member for Sturt, and it has nothing to do with the legislation before the chair. I would ask you to rule in my favour.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott): Member for Reid, that is not a point of order in this chamber.

Mr PYNE: In closing, can I say how sad I am to be standing in the House of Representatives to defend free speech in 2013. I never thought that, in the 20 years that I have been in parliament—or in the years I hope to be in parliament yet—that I would be called upon to defend freedom of speech in this country. It shows the nadir that this government and this Prime Minister have reached. And they will reap the whirlwind of their yesterdays on 14 September.