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Submission to Inquiry into the Debt Reduction and Savings Bill 2021

On behalf of the Executive Committee and Members of Queensland Country Press Association Inc this submission refers to the proposed amendments to the Financial Accountability Act 2009 relating to “*Requirement to publish particular information online*”.

The key points of this submission are:

1. Objection to proposed legislation which removes the requirement for statutory advertising and notices to be advertised in printed newspapers and provides for that advertising to be placed on digital online websites;
2. The potential for lack of transparency in advising the general public of important issues given limited general public ready access to online sites
3. The significant growth in the number of independent print publications over the past year in regional Queensland, which contradicts The Hon Treasurer’s statements to Parliament on March 25, 2021, when he claimed closure of News Corporation’s publications had left thousands of Queenslanders without local newspapers.
4. At a time when the regional newspaper industry is being reinvigorated and reinstating many of the 1000+ jobs lost from NewsCorp, the Government is withdrawing the very advertising requirements which provide revenue.

It is acknowledged the Hon Treasurer told the House:

“The new section provides for an exemption from the online publication measure where the print publication is to take place in a regional newspaper. That is because wherever regional newspapers continue to operate, we will continue to ensure government can support them.”

QCPA certainly appreciates the Hon Treasurer’s commitment, but in the fine print of the proposed changes it appears clear that the legislation requires notices to be advertised “online” – and the placement of notice advertising in regional newspapers appears as an option- as indicated by Dr Fraine in the recent public hearing- “. . . can give consideration to publishing them in newspapers!”

It is most disappointing that this option is classified as “an exception” instead of being the legislated preference.

We respectfully submit that the proposed wording of the legislation be amended to mandate that in regional areas where a printed newspaper is published that statutory public notices be placed in that publication, with the option to advertise notices online should no relevant print publication exist.

And whilst it is acknowledged our State Government is charged with maintaining efficiencies and cost savings, the major concern is the risk of Government transparency around sensitive decisions, such as land use, mining leases, etc., where Departments and corporations could opt to place notices online, where they would fundamentally be “hidden” from general gaze.

The proposed changes to “digital advertising” lack any detail about what that actually means and ignores the fact that news websites or Government online portals don’t have dedicated “public notice” sections. The principle behind advertising important government and corporate “public notices” section of a newspapers is to bring those decisions to the attention of the public, not bury them away in some newly created and hard-to-find section of a website.

In the past 12 months, membership of Queensland Country Press Association has expanded to 47 Print Publisher Members and 29 Online Publisher Members, following the addition of 22 new newspaper members, mostly start-ups in centres previously serviced by NewsCorp regional newspapers.

This a time when the Queensland Government should be celebrating the strong resurgence of independent newspapers in regional areas, where there are now more independent publishers than there has been for decades.

This growth belies a key reason – loss of local newspapers in regional areas - provided as justification for the change to the advertising regulations.

For and on behalf of the Executive Committee of
Queensland Country Press Association Inc.



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