



Media raids and press freedom – business implications

***Interview Ai Group Chief Executive, Innes Willox,
On ABC Radio AM with Sabra Lane and Peter Ryan***

SABRA LANE: Business is becoming increasingly concerned that this week's Federal Police raids on the ABC and News Corporation risk eroding confidence in Australia's reputation as a free and open democracy.

Innes Willox is a former political advisor, diplomat and now chief executive of the Australian Industry Group and he worries about the perceived politicisation of supposedly independent government departments and agencies.

Mr Willox says investors will become nervous if confidential negotiations, for example, end up in the hands of public servants.

Innes Willox is speaking here with senior business correspondent, Peter Ryan.

INNES WILLOX: What it has done is sort of set back Australia's reputation internationally.

And when you have reports of this going around the world, and the New York Times saying that Australia is now perhaps the most secretive country in the Western democracies, that raises alarm bells for business as well about the sort of country that Australia is to do business with and what could happen here.

PETER RYAN: You're a former senior political staffer, a diplomat, a former journalist. Are you as confident as you were, say, 10 years ago that government departments and agencies operate independently with no political interference or direction?

INNES WILLOX: The Government seems to be saying that ministers have had no control over what's gone on here, and this is essentially a decision by public servants to take this course of action. And that raises alarm bells, that this is sort of something that the Government has not been able to make decisions about and public servants, for whatever reason — be it embarrassment or ideas about what is in the national interest and what isn't — are able to act completely unilaterally.

PETER RYAN: So far these AFP raids have been limited to media organisations but business negotiations, government tenders bidding, lobbying can also be very sensitive politically.

Are you concerned that the AFP might extend its reach beyond the media?

INNES WILLOX: Well, there is nothing really, at the moment, to stop it from doing that and that is of concern. So businesses have interactions with government all the time, as you said on contracts, on tenders, as part of ongoing discussions about implementation of policy and the like, and a lot of those conversations and discussions are very sensitive.

They are commercially in-confidence and there is nothing, at the moment, which would stop government officials being able to call in police over some aspect of those negotiations.

PETER RYAN: But if a government department or agency was worried about leaks, wouldn't they be able to track down the leakers or the whistle-blowers via their own internal monitoring, rather than raiding the end point, in this case, the media?

INNES WILLOX: Well, this seems to be a case of shooting the messenger. You would think that the Government would be able to track that down.

In the case of the ABC raid, they already have a perpetrator that they're looking at. But to have Federal Police officers — and it is not their fault — but to have Federal Police officers combing through people's books and sock drawers is a pretty dim image for Australia to have in the 21st century.

It is not the sort of image we want — and you would hope that government, generally, is much more sophisticated than that.

PETER RYAN: The AFP's Acting Commissioner says he is a strong supporter of press freedom but judging by this week's events, do you buy that?

INNES WILLOX: Unfortunately for them, the AFP's reputation has been damaged by this and they're just doing their job. Now it behoves everyone to rethink how governments react in these circumstances, but we don't want Australia to be developing a reputation as a secretive state.

We want to be an open, inclusive and outward-looking country with an economy that matches that. And we don't want to drive people away; we want to attract them here.

SABRA LANE: Innes Willox, the head of the Australia Industry Group speaking there with the senior business correspondent, Peter Ryan.