



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Submission by the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia to the inquiry into the *Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023* 31 August 2023

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia, welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023*. Given the important role that media plays in our democracy and in shaping public debate, the Synod urges the Committee to recommend that the Parliament pass the Bill.

From its foundation, the Uniting Church in Australia upheld the need for truth in public life. In its Statement to the Nation at its inaugural National Assembly of representatives of the Uniting Church across Australia in 1977, it stated:

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.

From the above, the Uniting Church also committed itself to opposing racism and forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms. Thus, the Synod supports the regulation of media to prevent the promotion of racism and prejudice and harmful forms of discrimination.

The commitment to oppose discrimination was affirmed in relation to people with same-sex sexual orientation by the meeting of delegates of the Uniting Church across Victoria in 1985, who passed a resolution:

To call upon all political parties in Victoria to support an amendment to the Equal Opportunity Act to ensure that individual homosexual citizens are not discriminated against in employment, housing or the provision of goods and services solely on the grounds of their homosexuality.

The position was affirmed by the meetings of the Synod delegates in 1994 that adopted a resolution:

That the Synod request the Commonwealth Government to enact anti-discrimination legislation prohibiting discrimination against gay men and lesbians in areas of housing, employment, education and the provision of goods and services.

The Synod meeting declared its strong opposition to racism in 1997, passing a resolution:

Affirming that all people are equal in God's sight and noting with alarm the rise of racism in Australian society:

- (a) To declare its unequivocal opposition to the promotion of racially discriminatory policies;*
- (b) To request presbyteries, in consultation with the Commission for Mission, to run public forums to discuss the reasons behind and ways of overcoming the rise of racism in the community;*
- (c) To call upon parishes to make public in their local media, either by advertisement or article, their opposition to any form of racism, and to refuse use of their property for any meetings promoting racially discriminatory policies; and*
- (d) To reject the policies of the One Nation Party and any other party that promotes policies that are racially discriminatory.*

In 2003, the meeting of Uniting Church delegates from across Australia passed a resolution against racism at the National Assembly meeting:

Trusting that in Jesus Christ God has broken down barriers between all people, and by the Holy Spirit is able to transform lives and heal communities,

- (a) To recognise again that racism is a sin that reflects our alienation from God and one another and is incompatible with the Gospel;*
- (b) To reaffirm its commitment to work to overcome racism in Australia and beyond;*
- (c) To call on the church to model the inclusive love of Christ, building communities of justice and love and practising respect and equality in all our relationships; and*
- (d) To urge members of the Uniting Church, particularly those in leadership, to attend a Confronting Racism or Looking with New Eyes workshop to explore ways of working to eradicate racism.*

The 2005 Synod meeting passed a resolution opposing the incitement of hatred:

- (a) That it is opposed to the incitement of hatred against people on any basis, including that of religion;*
- (b) To acknowledge and welcome open dialogue between faiths, including critique and criticism, provided that such dialogue seeks to be respectful, accurate and objective, is open to gaining new understandings, and is willing to admit errors;*
- (c) To support the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 as achieving a balance between being a 'safety net' for preventing incitement to hatred of people based on their race or religion while allowing for legitimate freedom of speech;*
- (d) To advise the Premier and Leader of the Opposition and all Members of Parliament in Victoria of this resolution.*

The 2010 Synod meeting adopted a comprehensive position against harmful discrimination:

While acknowledging that a balance needs to be struck between freedom to practise religious beliefs and the right not to be discriminated against in relation to certain characteristics in the areas of employment, education, provision of goods and services, and accommodation; and notwithstanding the Uniting Church's support for

religious liberty, its support for UN human rights treaties through the National Assembly Resolution Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person 2006, and Synod resolution 93.5.1.1-3(c),

- (a) (i) *To support the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in its assertion that “any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous” and therefore to oppose all forms of harmful racial discrimination and all laws that legalise harmful racial discrimination, even when such discrimination is religiously motivated;*
- (ii) *To recognise that all people are created in the image of God and therefore to oppose all forms of harmful discrimination against people with disabilities, even when religiously motivated, except where not discriminating would place unreasonable costs on a body to accommodate such persons and, in the area of employment, where a person with a disability is unable to fulfil the genuine inherent requirements of the role;*
- (iii) *While noting that the current polity of the Uniting Church would not allow discrimination in ordination in any of the areas below, to oppose harmful discrimination and laws that accommodate harmful discrimination in education, clubs and club membership, sport, provision of goods and services, local government, accommodation, employment and employment-related areas, excluding ordination, on the grounds of:*
- *age*
 - *breastfeeding*
 - *industrial activity*
 - *status as a carer*
 - *physical features*
 - *political belief or activity*
 - *parental status*
 - *pregnancy*
 - *gender identity*
 - *marital status*
 - *sex*
 - *sexual orientation*
- even where such discrimination is religiously motivated. The only exception to this opposition to discrimination on the above grounds is in the area of employment where, as a result of one of the above characteristics, the person is unable to fulfil the inherent requirements of the role.*
- (b) *To write to the Victorian and Tasmanian Attorneys General and Shadow Attorneys General to inform them of this resolution.*
- (c) *To ask the Justice and International Mission Unit to keep these matters under review and report to future Synods.*

The Synod meeting adopted a position against harmful discrimination on religious grounds in 2010:

While acknowledging that a balance needs to be struck between freedom to practise religious beliefs and the right not to be discriminated against in relation to certain characteristics and notwithstanding the Uniting Church’s support for religious liberty, its support for UN human rights treaties through the National Assembly Resolution Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person 2006 and Synod resolution 93.5.1.1-3(c)

- (b) *To oppose religiously motivated harmful discrimination generally and to commend the Justice and International Mission Unit for their work in the following areas:*
 - (ii) *Antisemitic discrimination;*
 - (iii) *Discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt;*
 - (iv) *Discrimination against Christian and Muslim Dalits in India;*
 - (v) *Discrimination against Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories; and*
 - (vi) *Discrimination against Christians in Indonesia, especially in the construction of churches*
- (b) *To support laws that would prevent the forms of discrimination listed in clause (a); and*
- (c) *To note that the absence of a situation of religiously motivated harmful discrimination from this list does not indicate the Synod's support for such discrimination.*

In light of the above resolutions, in the view of the Synod, press freedoms are important but not absolute. Media is an essential part of democracy but has also engaged in activity that undermines democracy and has promoted prejudice against certain minority groups in Australia.

The role the media has played in eroding trust in democratic government is explored in-depth in the book 'The Rise of the Outsiders' by BBC political commentator Steve Richards. He states:¹

If an editor begins with an assumption that politics is defined by the gap between a distant elite and the people, the end result on TV screens and the radio is bound to reflect that attitude. There is no left or right bias in such an assumption. There is a bias against politics, or a misunderstanding of how politics works.

He concludes:²

The instinct to mistrust elected leaders is fuelled by some media outlets, which regard their main duty in relation to elected leaders as being to ask, as one interviewer put it, 'Why is this lying bastard lying to me?' It goes without saying that sometimes politicians fuel the mistrust because they do not deserve to be trusted. They can be indiscriminately greedy, self-serving and, in a few cases, corrupt. But on the whole, there is a more interesting and reassuring set of explanations as to why leaders behave in the way they do. As they seek to resolve the conundrums and dilemmas, they cannot always be candid and sometimes have to go back on previous pledges or declarations.

The interests of billionaire owners of private media do not always align with the common good and public interest. These vested interests provide a strong reason to limit the concentration of media in the hands of any one billionaire. However, media ownership restrictions do not address the problem of when the interests of the collective billionaires who own most of the media align on an issue. French Assistant Professor of Economics Julia Cagé has raised the concern that the ability of billionaires to buy up large sections of the media is a way of them subverting restrictions on political finance or enhancing the impact of the political donations

¹ Steve Richards, 'The Rise of the Outsiders. How Mainstream Politics Lost its Way', Atlantic Books, London, 2017, 251.

² Steve Richards, 'The Rise of the Outsiders. How Mainstream Politics Lost its Way', Atlantic Books, London, 2017, 281.



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they make. In her view, there are the problems that:³

The protection of editorial independence is much too often left to their [the owner's] discretion, whereas it should be guaranteed by law and encouraged through a more pluralist ownership of the media, including by journalists as well as readers, listeners and viewers. As in the case of political foundations, the concentration of power in the hands of one man – or of him and his family – cannot augur well for the functioning of our democracies. Second, beyond the (sometimes very real) dangers of direct censorship on the owner's part, there is also the question of journalistic self-censorship. How can a journalist deal calmly with economic matters that directly affect the industrial interests of the paper's owners?

The Committee should reject the view that unregulated media serves to enhance our democracy. The Synod is of the view governments need to regulate the media for the common good and public interest, including matters from the Bill such as:

- Concentration of media ownership;
- An effective regulator to remedy complaints;
- Addressing misinformation and disinformation pushed through media channels;
- Restricting the targeting of marginalised communities by media outlets including on grounds of their race, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexuality, and economic status; and,
- The role of government in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector.

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³ Julia Cagé, 'The Price of Democracy. How money shapes politics and what to do about it' (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 125.