**Civil Society Statement of Concern**

**The media and Mr Duncan Storrar**

**Friday 20 May 2016**

We are a diverse group of community leaders, commentators and thinkers in civil society and civic participation coming together to express concerns about the media treatment of Mr Duncan Storrar and what this says about the current state of our democracy.

Mr Storrar is a person with a disability experiencing a low income who has been subject to intense and intrusive negative scrutiny after asking a question about tax inequality on a current affairs program.

On the ABC’s [Q&A program](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqebMhR8we4) on Monday 9 May 2016 Mr Storrar asked a question about the Budget, tax cuts, and income inequality. In speaking to these topical current affairs matters he identified as a person with disability who is struggling to support a family while experiencing a low income. Mr Storrar engaged in appropriate and civil discussion inside the program format and made a valid response that all people pay tax including via taxes applied to petrol, goods and services.

Since asking that question Mr Storrar has been subject to an onslaught of personal investigations, attacks, intrusion into his privacy, family and ridicule in a range of publications, including [The Australian](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/broadcast/the-truth-about-my-father-duncan-storrar-the-q--a-hero/news-story/ecf8f9d4eebbd54f9899697053fb445b) and [The Herald Sun](http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=video&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwio8_2bm9zMAhVBnZQKHes-DMYQtwIIHjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.heraldsun.com.au%2Fnews%2Fqa-star-duncan-storrar-exposed-as-thug-as-public-raise-60000%2Fnews-story%2F40fa76230ca09820313a9372de4b0aa9&usg=AFQjCNFouvoHjXT-LAxfKy4KhB2HMJmZQQ&bvm=bv.122129774,d.dGo) newspapers. The patent disregard of the impact of this reporting on an individual is an abuse of power. The reporting has also been a further example of the willingness of parts of the media to vilify and demonise people on low incomes or from marginalised backgrounds.

We believe it’s time to ask why a member of the community is being targeted in an extreme way for simply asking a question about the fairness of a tax cut on a national broadcaster during an election campaign.

The issues involved go beyond one individual and represent a turning point for the open debate, discussion, criticism and dissent which underpin our free society.

It’s also time we heard where our leaders stand on the rights of all people, particularly community members, to participate in public debates without bullying and intimidation. Political leaders have a positive obligation to protect public participation by people who are less powerful, knowing that more powerful people will otherwise dominate our democracy.

It is a public right to ask questions. It is the job of the media to report them and the responsibility of parliamentarians to protect our ability to do so.

Therefore:

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We are **concerned** that:

* a member of the community is being targeted in an extreme and disproportionate way for peacefully expressing widely held views on income and equality issues on the national broadcaster during the federal election campaign;
* the treatment of Mr Storrar sets a dangerous precedent across the democratic process. Any person who writes a letter, takes part in a newspaper ‘vox pop’ or rings a talk back radio station with views about income inequality or fairness now has a reasonable basis for feeling under threat of retribution through intrusive and personalised attacks;
* that people on low incomes or people with a disability, people living with a mental illness who are vulnerable or marginalised are systematically excluded from the democratic process when it comes to participating in public debates. This is a dangerous and unhelpful position which reverses democratic tradition dating back to the abolition of property rights for suffrage; and
* there appears to be a lack of leadership from politicians, institutions and the media to safeguard long held rights for all people to express their lived experience as part of the democratic process during a Federal Election.

We **call on**:

* **Our national leaders** including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to clearly and publically reaffirm the rights and responsibilities of all people regardless of background, disabilities or income level, to take part in public debate and to express diverse opinions in the public square in a peaceful way free from bullying, personal intrusion, harassment or intimidation;
* **The incoming Human Rights Commissioner** to begin a dialogue on responsible measures, such as an Australian Bill of Rights, to safeguard the rights of members of the community and civil society organisations to engage in civil discourse and public debate free from gags, threats, bullying and harassment;
* **The Press Council and the Australian Communications and Media Authority** to investigate whether the media treatment and extreme overreach in the response to Mr Storrar’s question on the national broadcaster constitutes a breach of their Standards and requirements. These include to avoid causing or contributing materially to substantial offence, distress or prejudice, or a substantial risk to health or safety unless doing so is sufficiently in the public interest; and
* **Media organisations** to recognise and affirm that the ability of individuals to speak in the public arena free from interference, bullying and intimidation is entwined with their own freedom to publish without interference, bullying and intimidation from the State.
* In doing so we invite all media outlets concerned with the coverage of Mr Storrar to reflect on the articles which underpin the [Charter for a Free Press in Australia](http://www.presscouncil.org.au/charter-of-press-freedom/) agreed by the Press Council in 2003.
* The charter preamble underpinned through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of the Declaration provides: "Everyone has the right of freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

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