

I would like to begin with an impassioned plea to really take note of the objections raised to this Bill, because our democracy is at stake. The Bill's negative consequences will far outweigh any possible good it may do.

1. Democracy relies on checks and balances. The government, especially in its Executive arm, needs to be checked by accountability to the people. Creating a machinery which only allows the "official" version of a story mitigates strongly against the ability of the people to hold the government (or whoever the government supports or favours) to account.
2. ACMA is a government organisation. Its members are government employees. You have to ask yourself if it's possible for the organization to be what it claims to be, i.e. "independent".

There are two essentials for establishing public confidence in the administration of justice:

- Justice needs to be done
- Justice needs to be seen to be done.

Where the AMCA is given the role of Censor, it's unlikely to be perceived by the public to be genuinely independent, and this will undermine public confidence in the government on all levels.

3. Even if the ACMA members do act according to their conscience, free from pressure, who chooses them? On what criteria? Every person's knowledge and understanding is limited, so why would we believe that the AMCA has a final and definitive understanding of what is true or not true? Better to let people have their say in the open, and rebut falsehood with demonstrable evidence.
4. Sometimes people, committees, government bodies get it wrong. Look at Galileo's case. History has it that Galileo was censored for his theory that the earth revolves around the sun. The Church (and most astronomers of the time) were vigorously opposed, and tried to enforce the "official version": the sun revolves around the earth. 500 years later, the earth still circles the sun, and the Pope has apologised. Do we want to make the same mistake as the Pope did, and bring ourselves into disrepute for hundreds of years? Shakespeare's not wrong when he says, "The truth will out."
5. We already have more than adequate tools to expose falsehood, especially nefarious falsehood. We have laws of libel, peer-reviewed academic papers, newspapers and

magazines, and Houses of Parliament where all sorts of questions can be asked. We need more questioning, more accountability, not less.

6. The truth bears scrutiny, and does not need the protection of censorship to stand up. Falsehood does not bear scrutiny. It needs the protection of censorship to hold together.
7. If the government institutes censorship – and there is no other word for it – the inevitable question in many minds will be: what are they hiding from us? And what do they have to fear?
8. Censorship, combined with the practice of only allowing an “official” version of whatever is going on, has been used to uphold all the world’s most unjust regimes: Apartheid, the Nazis, Stalin, Pinochet, Mao and more. Why does the current government want to put itself in the same box as these regimes, by advocating the same policies?
9. Government restriction on public debate invariably results in both limits on political participation (especially any form of opposition, the basis of democracy itself) and very real inequalities and injustices. In the example below, from Jung Chang’s acclaimed autobiography and family history, “Wild Swans – Three Daughters of China”, (pages 296 - 297) it was a major factor leading to famine, torture, and economic chaos. The situation described could not have developed in a political system respecting freedom of speech and public debate. Suppressing debate WILL suppress truth, and Australia is not immune to the natural consequences that will flow. Nor do the consequences have to be as extreme as the example given, to be disastrous.

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going to do with all that food? On second thought, it's not too bad to have too much food, really. The state doesn't want it. Everybody else has plenty of their own. But the farmers here can just eat and eat. You can eat five meals a day! Mao was intoxicated, indulging in the eternal dream of the Chinese peasant – surplus food. After these remarks, the villagers further stoked the desires of their Great Leader by claiming that they were producing more than a million pounds of potatoes per *mu* (one *mu* is one-sixth of an acre), over 130,000 pounds of wheat per *mu*, and cabbages weighing 500 pounds each.

Loss of personal responsibility - do we really want this?

It was a time when telling fantasies to oneself as well as others, and believing them, was practised to an incredible degree. Peasants moved crops from several plots of land to one plot to show Party officials that they had produced a miracle harvest. Similar 'Potemkin fields' were shown off to gullible – or self-blinded – agricultural scientists, reporters, visitors from other regions, and foreigners. Although these crops generally died within a few days because of untimely transplantation and harmful density, the visitors did not know that, or did not want to know. A large part of the population was swept into this confused, crazy world. 'Self-deception while deceiving others' (*zi-qi-qi-ren*) gripped the nation. Many people – including agricultural scientists and senior Party leaders – said they saw the miracles themselves. Those who failed to match other people's fantastic claims began to doubt and blame themselves. Under a dictatorship like Mao's, where information was withheld and fabricated, it was very difficult for ordinary people to have confidence in their own experience or knowledge. Not to mention that they were now facing a nationwide tidal wave of fervor which promised to swamp any individual coolheadedness. It was easy to start ignoring reality and simply put one's faith in Mao. To go along with the frenzy was by far the easiest course. To pause and think and be circumspect meant trouble.

An official cartoon portrayed a mouselike scientist whin-

This extract is set at the beginning of the 1957 great famine in China

ing, 'A stove like yours can only boil water to make tea.' Next to him stood a giant worker, lifting a huge sluice gate releasing a flood of molten steel, who retorted, 'How much can you drink?' Most who saw the absurdity of the situation were too frightened to speak their minds, particularly after the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957. Those who did voice doubts were immediately silenced, or sacked, which also meant discrimination against their family and a bleak prospect for their children.

In many places, people who refused to boast of massive increases in output were beaten up until they gave in. In Yibin, some leaders of production units were trussed up with their arms behind their backs in the village square while questions were hurled at them:

'How much wheat can you produce per *mu*?'

'Four hundred *jin*' (about 450 pounds – a realistic amount).

Then, beating him: 'How much wheat can you produce per *mu*?'

'Eight hundred *jin*.'

Even this impossible figure was not enough. The unfortunate man would be beaten, or simply left hanging, until he finally said: 'Ten thousand *jin*.' Sometimes the man died hanging there because he refused to increase the figure, or simply before he could raise the figure high enough.

Many grass-roots officials and peasants involved in scenes like this did not believe in the ridiculous boasting, but fear of being accused themselves drove them on. They were carrying out the orders of the Party, and they were safe as long as they followed Mao. The totalitarian system in which they had been immersed had sapped and warped their sense of responsibility. Even doctors would boast about miraculously healing incurable diseases.

Trucks used to turn up at our compound carrying grinning peasants coming to report on some fantastic, record-breaking achievement. One day it was a monster cucumber

No debate. accountability from government officials. Is this the Australian way?

In conclusion, I appeal to the time-honoured wisdom of the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm". This bill will unquestionably do much more harm than good. A small committee of a government body having the power to control what the rest of the population think and say is a recipe for disaster.

For the sake of the Australian people, the integrity of Parliament and for common sense, I beg you not to go ahead with this legislation.