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PRESS RELEASE

RESEARCHER ROASTS SENATE FINDINGS

Dr William De Maria, the principal researcher with the Queensland Whistleblower Study at The University of Queensland, has congratulated the Senate Select Committee on Public Interest Whistleblowing for tabling last Wednesday a report that he has described as "significantly advancing the cause of public interest disclosures in Australia".

Dr De Maria said that the report recognises the social importance of whistleblowing: "The Committee appears to have listened very carefully to the evidence put before it that now, more than ever, Australia must stand behind its employees of conscience, who risk so much to bring wrongdoing to our attention."

"The Committee", Dr De Maria said, "is to be further congratulated for recognising how management wilfully carries out organisational vendettas against whistleblowers."

However Dr De Maria was critical of the Committee for not following through on one of its findings: "The Senate Committee found that the agencies that are ostensibly in place to deal with corruption and wrongdoing are riddled with incompetence, indifference and insufficient funding." "Yet," he added, "the Committee has recommended that the two of these organisations, the Merit Protection and Review Agency and the Commonwealth Ombudsman be responsible for protection of whistleblowers and the investigation of their complaints." Both agencies he said have no experience in dealing with whistleblowers. "Worse than that" he added, "these agencies are consciously avoided by many whistleblowers in the Commonwealth public sector."

"I find this recommendation unbelievably naive", Dr De Maria said. "Especially disturbing is the fact that the Director of the Merit Protection and Review Agency gave oral evidence to the Senate Committee in such a way that the Chairperson, Senator Jocelyn Newman, had to remark, 'We have taken evidence now round several states as well, and I cannot think of another agency that seems to have a problem of recognising a whistleblower when they see one'."

All Australians, particularly the whistleblowing community cannot be expected to put their faith in the Merit Protection and Review Agency when the Chairperson of the Select Committee is forced to make these critical observations, Dr De Maria said.

"We should also be concerned about the recommendation to give investigating authority to the Commonwealth Ombudsman", Dr De Maria said. He added, "Our evidence indicates that the Ombudsman lacks the political will to carry out the really heavy investigations and is too integrated into the system of government to be trusted any more."

What is needed is a powerful independent authority directly answerable to Parliament, not a Minister, that can investigate wrongdoing and protect those who make public interest disclosures.

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