



Tom Mooney's address at the 2026 Community Broadcasting Association of Australia Annual Conference



**DEMOCRACY
COUNTS**

POWERED BY MCKINNON



Delivered on Friday 23 October 2026 at the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) Annual Conference.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your conference.

I acknowledge the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nation, the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

I also acknowledge First Nations community broadcasters with us today.

At the outset, I'd also like to reflect on Dr Helen Haines MP, and the horrific events of this week.

Helen is a champion of fairness, transparency and accountability in government.

Her leadership was recognised in 2022, when she was awarded the McKinnon Emerging Political Leader of the Year for her commitment to integrity in politics, her dedication to her electorate and her ability to bring people together to achieve change.

Helen is a person of integrity, warmth and decency who works to elevate the voices of those in her community and to ensure Australia's democracy delivers for its people.

I understand we have broadcasters from Indi here at this conference – from places like Wangaratta, Marysville and Alexandra. I know your communities will be reeling from this awful event.

And it is people like you who are helping your own communities to make sense of it.

For that, I thank you.

I've had the privilege of knowing and working with Helen.

Our democracy only works if decent people with character, commitment, compassion and capability are willing to put their hand up to serve their communities by representing them.

And Helen is most definitely a woman of character, commitment, compassion and immense capability.

I know this room joins me in wishing Helen strength, and in sending our love to her family, her staff and the people of Indi.

While the circumstances of this horrific event are now a matter for the courts – it has given us all cause to reflect on the preciousness of our democracy – the challenges it faces, and what we must all do to preserve it.

All of you in this room are already playing a crucial role in preserving our democracy.

Democracy is held together by people telling their community's stories to each other, and that is what you do every day.

You broadcast in dozens of languages.



You reach towns and communities commercial media left long ago, seniors, people living with disability and faith communities.

And you do it to standards of fairness and accuracy, very often with volunteers.

That isn't just media. It's democratic infrastructure.

For those I haven't met, I'm Tom Mooney, Executive Director of the Democracy Counts campaign.

Democracy Counts is a non-partisan alliance of 65 organisations with diverse interests, but a shared commitment to safeguarding democracy.

Democracy Counts is powered by McKinnon, a non-partisan not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to empower better governments for a stronger Australia.

Our alliance partners include the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia itself, alongside the Local and Independent News Association, the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom and other publishers' groups.

Beyond the media sector, our alliance extends to civil society organisations working in digital rights, human rights, in accountability and integrity, and in civics, media and digital literacy education.

Our supporters include former political leaders, experts and community advocates.

All have come together to drive democratic renewal, to update the rules around politics and media in Australia.

We aim to build the political space and pressure for reform through public advocacy and engagement.

We're building a platform which gives Australians agency – to 'Count themselves in' to be a part of a movement that drives the change they want to see.

And through that change we will improve the way our democracy works – and rebuild satisfaction with Australian democracy.

Democracy is not just a collection of institutions, of laws, conventions, and elections – it is a practice, a culture – something we live every day.

When it comes to democracy as an institution – Australia has built a democracy that is stronger than most.

Almost all of us vote because voting is compulsory, so almost everyone has a say.

Votes are counted independently by the AEC, and the result is trusted.

Preferential voting means all votes still matter in the outcome, even if your first choice does not win.

These are strengths worth protecting.

But we are not immune from the challenges democracy is facing around the world.



Trust is in decline - eroded in an environment where outrage, division and sensationalism are incentivised.

Online, misinformation moves faster than facts.

Artificial intelligence and social media enable false information to be created and spread at unprecedented speed and scale.

Social media platforms profit from our attention and our data – but don't face the basic rules we expect of companies in any other industry

Foreign actors weaponise that environment to undermine our unity, our democracy, and our security.

Newsrooms are closing and journalism is under threat as news publishers lose advertising revenue to social media companies who don't invest in journalism – even though that journalism helped bring users to their platforms.

And Australians feel ignored by a system that isn't meeting their needs or their expectations.

Australians feel that decisions are being made in the interests of politicians and vested interests, not in their own.

Australians are tired of campaigns built on attack ads and spin, not real plans to address the issues impacting them.

In November 2025, McKinnon released the inaugural McKinnon Index – a health check of Australian democracy.

It involved a survey of 4,400 Australians conducted by Roy Morgan – measuring Australians' views on the effectiveness of our governments and democracy over time.

The good news is that support for democracy is high – 76% of Australians support democracy as a system of government.

The bad news is that satisfaction with how democracy is working is lower – at about 55%.

The question is – what is driving this?

Trust in independent institutions is high, but trust in politicians is much lower.

Our research shows that 70% of Australians trust the independent Australian Electoral Commission.

But only 36% trust political parties, and just 31% of Australians trust federal politicians.

And most Australians don't think politicians understand and represent them.

This is more pronounced the further from major cities you get.

In major cities - 55% disagree with the statement that Australia's federal politicians represent people like them.



In inner regional areas – 61% disagree with that statement.

In outer regional and remote areas – 65% disagree with that statement.

As a part of building the Democracy Counts campaign, we conducted further research – quantitative and qualitative.

In the qualitative research - this quote from one participant stood out:

“I don’t know if anyone in politics really fights for me specifically, I feel like a lot of politicians only have their best interests at heart and say whatever they need to say to get elected next time.”

Too many Australians feel ignored by our politicians, and our institutions.

And so we launched Democracy Counts.

Because we know that democracy is not static.

It is a process.

We believe the trends we are seeing can be reversed.

We believe democracy is worth protecting, and it can be protected.

And we are advocating for renewal of the rules around politics and media in Australia - with a focus on six areas:

1. Increasing funding for public interest journalism;
2. Protecting our nation from disinformation and interference through social media;
3. Supporting modern civics and media literacy education;
4. Implementing truth in political advertising laws;
5. Regulating lobbying so that politics works for all and not just some; and
6. Creating greater independence for public service appointments.

These are the reforms governments and parliaments must embrace - to earn back the public’s trust in politics and politicians, and to ensure all Australians can have a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their lives.

They are the result of deep research led by former South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill AO, including almost one hundred interviews with political practitioners, academics, and others in the democracy ‘ecosystem’.

It may not surprise this group to hear that three of the top six ways to strengthen democracy relate to news production or consumption: public interest journalism, protecting us from disinformation and foreign interference through social media, and civics and media literacy education.

Today, I’d like to give our perspective on the importance of Public Interest Journalism, what we’re doing to support the news media sector overall, the importance of Community Broadcasting within the sector, and our commitment to partnering with you.



A robust democracy depends on voters having a shared understanding of the facts.

Public interest journalism is an essential feature of our political system. It matters because it informs citizens, scrutinises power and holds governments to account.

Yet, our traditional news sector has never faced greater challenges.

20% of the advertising revenue that once flowed to *commercial* radio and print newsrooms now finds its way to the bottom line of foreign headquartered tech giants – businesses that produce little or no original public interest reporting in Australia.

At the same time, online business models are built on sensationalism, misinformation and outrage.

And fake content isn't actively dealt with.

The result is a media environment that too often amplifies division while weakening trust.

The consequences are visible across the country.

Over the past two decades in particular, local newsrooms have closed, merged or downsized.

Journalists have disappeared from some regional communities.

Specialist reporting has contracted.

Australians now receive less coverage of local councils, courts, planning decisions, health services and state politics – the very institutions that most directly affect our daily lives.

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative documented this decline between 2020 and 2024.

That research found there are around 20% fewer journalists providing their essential democratic service.

This figure is also reflected in ABS data.

News deserts have now emerged in 27 Australian local government areas – localities that aren't serviced by any independent news service.

Through all of this, community radio **hasn't** shrunk – it's held its ground.

That isn't a sign you don't need more investment. Quite the reverse – it shows that as the commercial sector contracts, your sector has become increasingly important as a vehicle to keep the public informed rather than simply entertained.

In an age where legacy media is steadily replaced with podcasters, content creators, and influencers, community broadcasting acts as a bulwark against declining standards of fairness, transparency, accountability, and avoidance of conflicts of interest – and a commitment to do no harm.

For too long we have seen the changing Australian news production landscape as simply a market disruption.



It is not simply a commercial problem – it is a democratic problem.

The former federal government's News Media Bargaining Code, and the current government's News Bargaining Incentive scheme, are attempts to claw back some of the revenue that now flows offshore, to ensure we can retain a vibrant and diverse Australian news sector.

The good news is – there's broad support in the community for this cause.

Our research showed that 69% of Australians support government intervention to ensure that large social media companies pay their fair share of tax.

And it showed that 64% of Australians support imposing a tax on large social media companies to fund public interest journalism and re-establish regional media where it has been lost – and only 10% of Australians oppose that idea.

Under the News Media Bargaining Code, large commercial publishers were best positioned to secure deals, while many small, independent and regional outlets struggled to participate on equal terms.

It remains to be seen whether the present News Bargaining Incentive will deliver for small and independent broadcasters and publishers –

By this time next year we will have a full picture of whether big tech will strike deals with media players or elect to pay a levy which government would then distribute, including to community radio and TV stations that are sharing local news online.

What I will say is that without the efforts of Reece Kinnane at the CBAA there's no doubt the NBI would have only benefitted the large legacy media organisations.

It was expected that big tech would move swiftly to strike deals with news producers within a month of the NBI passing. That hasn't happened.

While they might still do so, there's every possibility that the tech giants will simply opt to pay the Statutory Payments Scheme levy.

This would mean a fund of \$250 million being made available to be shared across Australia's entire news production sector.

It's important to note that this fund is a new concept – and one legislated on the insistence of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, the Local and Independent News Association, First Nations Media Australia, Multicultural Voices Australia, Christian Media and Arts, Democracy Counts, and other partners that joined the campaign.

I applaud the leadership role the CBAA has played – not only on behalf of its own members, but in supporting the wider Australian news sector during the recent period of News Bargaining Incentive policy design and advocacy – as a defender of the principles of Public Interest Journalism.

The effort made by your organisation to support the broader news sector will pay dividends.

The NBI is **just one** policy measure out of scores that have been floated in recent years for government adoption.



From our perspective, the policy objective should not be preserving certain media businesses over others.

It should be preserving public interest journalism itself – and the ability for our stories to be told to our communities.

Those stories – our understanding of each other, knowing what events are happening in our neighbourhood, how the local footy team is doing in the season – strand by strand, stitch together our collective identity and values.

Those stories are crucial to democracy as a practice.

The practice of rubbing up against each other in our everyday lives.

Sometimes with people like us, sometimes with people who are different.

Sometimes with people who agree with us, sometimes with people who don't.

The practice of listening, of understanding perspectives, of disagreeing respectfully – and still sitting down for a beer or a cup of tea.

That culture, that practice – is being lost. A muscle weakened. But one that telling human stories – can help to strengthen.

And so in the debate on the News Bargaining Incentive, we were motivated to ensure greater acceptance amongst parliamentarians that journalism is an essential part of our democratic infrastructure.

The social value of Public Interest Journalism isn't just about providing news within a geographic area – though it's clear that community radio and TV broadcast across the entire Australian continent.

Community broadcasters and specialist publishers serve culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, seniors, people living with disability and faith communities.

During natural disasters, local radio frequently becomes the most trusted and accessible source of emergency information.

A healthy media system must therefore be judged by more than scale.

The central question is whether Australians will continue to have access to accurate, and locally relevant reporting.

Future funding models across the entire news media sector (including your segment) should reflect that principle directly – rewarding editorial standards, civic contribution, local accountability reporting and public interest outcomes – just as funding for community broadcasting already does.

Where the commercial sector is concerned, when market failure threatens the public interest, governments have a responsibility to respond carefully, and on the basis of evidence.



And in all of the challenges in the modern information environment, community broadcasters have again been leading the way.

Given the growing need to counter misinformation and disinformation, investment in community broadcasting is more urgent than ever.

Community broadcasters were the first in the Australian media sector to specifically address mis- and disinformation in your sector's Codes of Practice.

Your own guiding principles – democracy, access and equity – are the very values our campaign is fighting for.

Community broadcasting:

- Works to overcome prejudice and discrimination
- Enhances the diversity of viewpoints and programming choices; and
- Is independent and community controlled.

That is why community broadcasters will play such a crucial role in rebuilding that democratic muscle.

How does Democracy Counts partner with the sector?

You might ask – how does an advocacy campaign connect to your work of providing broadcast services to your listeners?

We partner with the sector in three ways:

1. Providing a well-researched evidence base;
2. Building consensus within the news media sector around policy options; and
3. Creating an environment that supports government action.

Given the statements by officials in Senate budget estimates this year that the federal department for communications is not 'actively' monitoring news diversity, there is a real need for evidence.

How can the government make a 'call' on future funding needs without evidence?

The research by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative I mentioned earlier – tracking newsroom downsizing, mergers and closures between 2020 and 2024 – was funded by McKinnon.

We have further funded Macquarie University and the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom to extend this research with an interim report due in December of this year.

This work could help arm the sector with evidence to support engagement with Treasury in the lead up to the May 2027 budget.

Our partners are also advocating for different responses, including to:

- Properly define journalism
- Introduce a Media Freedom Bill next year into federal parliament
- Build a new industry association, Journalism Australia



- Ensure 'new media' podcasters, content creators, influencers and others that hold themselves out to be journalists learn and adopt traditional media standards in news production of fairness, accuracy, accountability, avoidance of conflicts of interest.

We are committed to ensuring a secure and sustainable future for journalism in Australia.

That includes more support for community broadcasters to sustain and grow journalism and news content.

We can only make that case with your help. So I have three asks.

First – tell your stories – to your audience, to us, to leaders – of the challenges to the media environment, what that means for your listeners, and what change we need to see by our governments and parliaments to ensure they can continue to benefit from the service you provide.

Second – help us reach your listeners, by explaining what this campaign means for the communities you serve.

We have 65 campaign partners – each with experienced experts and spokespeople whose work touches everything from integrity and accountability, to journalism, to civics education and digital media literacy. If you're talking about democracy, we've got someone who can help give your audience information.

And third – right now – pull out your phones.

Go to www.DemocracyCounts.org.au and sign up to be “counted in” to our campaign.

This means we will be able to notify you the moment we hear of legislative or policy changes affecting the sector, and to provide you with briefings and explainers you can use to inform your listeners.

Congratulations on this year's conference.

This week has reminded us that our democracy is precious, and fragile. It is held together by people who show up – people like Helen, and people like everyone in this room, who turn up at the station, so often as volunteers, to tell their community's stories.

Our democracy depends on it.

Thank you.