

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 1:50:21 PM

From: Fletcher, Paul (MP)

Sent: Thu, 29 Jul 2021 16:40:10

To: Minister

Subject: FW: Qld Council Website

Sensitivity: Normal

Attachments:

QCPA Bundaberg Now .pdf 

From: s 47F

Sent: Thursday, 29 July 2021 3:32 PM

To: Fletcher, Paul (MP)

Cc: Admin

Subject: Qld Council Website

Attention: Hon Paul Fletcher MP

Dear Sir

Please refer to concerns raised in attached letter regarding Queensland Council News websites

We would request a meeting to discuss further at your earliest convenience

Regards



(President QCPA)

s 47F

Queensland Sales Manager

Noosa Today

Warwick Stanthorpe Today

Real Estate View

Seniors Today

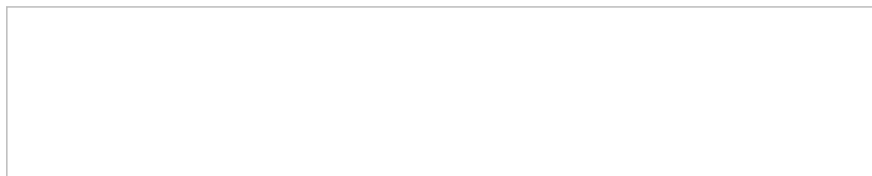
Star Media Platform (Digital Marketing)

Mobile: s 47F

Click this link: <https://noosatoday.com.au/subscribe/> or <https://warwickstanthorpetoday.com.au/subscribe/>

Email: s 47F @starnewsgroup.com.au

Web: noosatoday.com.au freetimes.com.au



From: s 47F (P. Fletcher, MP)
To: s 47F
Cc: s 47F [Invitations](#)
Subject: RE: Meeting request Min Keith Pitt [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Date: Friday, 30 July 2021 2:29:52 PM

From: s 47F [@industry.gov.au](mailto:s 47F@industry.gov.au)>
Sent: Friday, 30 July 2021 2:25 PM
To: s 47F (P. Fletcher, MP) s 47F [@aph.gov.au](mailto:s 47F@aph.gov.au)>
Cc: s 47F [@industry.gov.au](mailto:s 47F@industry.gov.au)>
Subject: Meeting request Min Keith Pitt [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Good Afternoon s 47F

I have been asked to organise a meeting between Minister Keith Pitt and Minister Paul Fletcher in relation to correspondence that was sent to Minister Fletcher regarding a **Queensland Press Council complaint that relates to a local media outlet (Hinkler)**.

I look forward to hearing back from you at your earliest convenience to organise a suitable meeting time and please do not hesitate to call if you have any queries.

Kind regards,

s 47F | Diary/Office Manager
Office of the Hon Keith Pitt MP
Minister for Resources & Water
Ph: s 47F
s 47F [@industry.gov.au](mailto:s 47F@industry.gov.au)
Suite M1.45 Parliament House, CANBERRA ACT 2600

OFFICIAL

Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Communications.
Australian Government

RE: Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) 'news' publishing division, *Bundaberg Now*.

Dear Minister Fletcher,

I'm writing on behalf of the members of the Queensland Country Press Association (QCPA) to seek an urgent meeting to discuss concerns we have about the conduct of Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) with regard to the operations of its controversial 'news' media division, *Bundaberg Now*. (See www.bundabergnow.com.au)

About Bundaberg Now

The Bundaberg Regional Council is the only council in Australia we are aware of that owns and directly operates its own large scale multi-media 'news' division. *Bundaberg Now* publishes several well-resourced and professionally produced 'news' stories per day across multiple media platforms covering everything from local sport and community news to business profiles. (Only a very small number of the stories published are Council related)

Bundaberg Now presents itself publicly as an independent local news service and concerningly is now the largest and best resourced 'news' publisher in Bundaberg. BRC employs more people to produce 'news' for *Bundaberg Now* than the ABC does in Bundaberg to produce independent news for the entire Wide Bay region!

However, unlike the ABC that has its own board of directors and a fiercely protected Charter of Independence to ensure journalists can ask tough questions of politicians, *Bundaberg Now* journalists have no independence at all, and the editorial content is directly controlled by Council itself. Despite presenting as an independent source of local news, there has never been one story published on *Bundaberg Now* that critically questions anything about the conduct of Council and/or Councillors.

Bundaberg Now has understandably attracted a large audience as it provides useful, interesting and professionally produced local 'news' content for 'free', and the *Bundaberg Now* Facebook page has more than 31,000 followers.

This makes Bundaberg Now a very powerful tool for BRC, and we believe that power is dangerous and is being abused.

Freedom of the press, the Fourth Estate, is democracy's correcting mechanism against corruption, and *Bundaberg Now* is undermining freedom of the press, and democracy in Bundaberg, and its existence sets a dangerous precedent.

Bundaberg Council is not the first to try this. It is on the public record that the idea for *Bundaberg Now* came from Ipswich, when disgraced former Mayor Paul Pisasale (since jailed for corruption) established a similar 'news' service called *Ipswich First*. Importantly, *Bundaberg Now* operates on a much larger scale than *Ipswich First* ever did, and pleasingly *Ipswich First* has since been reduced to reporting council updates, and its entire existence is the subject of review by the new Mayor and Council.

Specific concerns that we'd like to discuss are as follows:

1. Abandonment of Freedom of Press principles

- Unlike other councils, BRC no longer follows typical government media protocols.
- BRC now bypasses the analysis and scrutiny of local independent journalists by directly publishing their one-sided and self-serving media releases as 'news' to an unsuspecting public via their mass audience on Bundaberg Now.
- The local independent news media (ABC, News-Mail, Bundaberg Today and others) are now relegated to trying to correct the public record when important Council announcements are made.
- ABC Media Watch and ABC Wide Bay have labelled Bundaberg Now a 'propaganda machine'.

2. Secrecy around editorial control

- Despite repeated questions from local independent media about who makes editorial decisions for Bundaberg Now, and on what basis, BRC refuses to provide answers.
- ABC Wide Bay requested the Mayor appear on local radio to discuss/debate the editorial processes (and other matters relating to Bundaberg Now) but he refused to appear.
- The former Director of Communications of BRC, who was directly responsible for Bundaberg Now, is now the 'Chief of Staff' to the Mayor. A recent private email exchange (published under FOI) between a BRC Councillor (May Mitchell) and the CEO of BRC (Stephen Johnson) shows that Councillor Mitchell has serious concerns about the Mayor's Chief of Staff still being an administrator of the Bundaberg Now Facebook page. The published emails show that Cr Mitchell raised her concerns with the Department of Local Government, who confirmed her concerns were well founded and recommended that the Chief of Staff to the Mayor should have that access removed. When Cr Mitchell passed that advice on to the CEO, it was quickly dismissed.

3. Electoral interference risk

- The current Mayor is regularly featured positively in the 'news' on Bundaberg Now, but very few Councillors are.
- While it is common for incumbent Mayors to be the highest profile member of Council, Bundaberg Now publishes an artificially high number of stories featuring the Mayor and they are all positive. This biased media coverage is a significant distortion of the public reportage of his performance and gives him an unfair electoral advantage.
-

4. Corruption risk

- Bundaberg Now regularly publishes local 'business' stories and profiles.
- BRC has repeatedly refused to provide answers to questions about who decides which businesses are featured (and enjoy invaluable local promotion for free) and on what basis.
- The local newspaper (and QCPA member) Bundaberg Today, is currently researching a story where it is alleged a building company owned by a family member of a prominent Councillor has been promoted many times on the site (effectively receiving tens of thousands of dollars of ratepayer funded promotion) but their competitors have never been promoted on the site. BRC refuses to provide direct answers to questions on this matter.

5. Refusal to provide operating costs of Bundaberg Now

- Bundaberg Now is the largest news service in Bundaberg, with more staff than the ABC.
- Despite repeated requests from local media and the public, BRC refuses to disclose the operating cost of Bundaberg Now, despite the fact it is clearly a major project.
- In 2019, the ABC estimated the cost at \$1.4million per year. Based on the output published by Bundaberg Now, \$1.4million would seem conservative.

We believe these concerns we've outlined regarding Bundaberg Now are a 'canary in the coal mine' type warning for the issues facing Local Government and the impact on the fundamentals of democracy at a community level if this type of service is duplicated elsewhere.

Minister, in addition to seeking a solution for these serious concerns about BRC's abuse of power with regard to Bundaberg Now, we'd like to have a broader discussion about the responsibilities, transparency and risks facing all Queensland Councils with public relations departments.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this further on behalf of the members of the QCPA.

Sincerely

s 47F



President QCPA

Cc: Secretary QCPA
cc: ask@lgaq.asn.au

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 1:48:08 PM

From: Fletcher, Paul (MP)

Sent: Wed, 4 Aug 2021 17:00:07

To: Minister

Subject: FW: From Country Press Australia

Sensitivity: Normal

Attachments:

[CPA Letter to Minister Fletcher.docx](#) [CPA Bundaberg Now - 1.pdf](#) [Submission 11 - Bundaberg Regional Council72.pdf](#)

From: s 47F

Sent: Wednesday, 4 August 2021 4:30 PM

To: Fletcher, Paul (MP)

Cc: s 47F

Subject: From Country Press Australia

Dear Minister Fletcher,

Please see the attached letter from Country Press Australia President, s 47F together with two supporting documents.

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

s 47F

CPA Executive Director,

47F

PRESIDENT

s 47F
Plains Producer
Telephone: **s 47F**
Email: **s** @plainsproducer.com.au

MELBOURNE SECRETARIAT

1st floor, 163 Epsom Road, Flemington 3031
Postal Address: Locked Bag 1000, Ascot Vale, 3032
Telephone: (03) 8387 5500
Facsimile: (03) 9372 2792
Email: **s 47F** @vcpa.com.au

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**s 47F**

Hon Paul Fletcher MP,
Federal Member for Bradfield.
Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure,
Cities and the Arts
(Per email: Paul.Fletcher.MP@aph.gov.au)

Wednesday, August 4, 2021

Dear Minister,

I'm writing in relation to serious concerns we share with the Queensland Country Press Association (see attached earlier correspondence to your office from QCPA President, Phill Le Petit) about the conduct of Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC), with regard to its controversial 'news' division, *Bundaberg Now*.

We've been concerned about Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) since their Mayor Jack Dempsey became the only politician from any level of government to make a formal submission to the Senate Economics Legislation Committee opposing the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code Bill 2020.

In that submission (attached for reference) the Mayor claimed that: *"The Bill in its current form provides excessive powers to interfere in a free market and risks stifling innovation."*

Ironically BRC itself has brought the most extraordinary interference into the free market by creating the largest and best-funded 'newsroom' in Bundaberg, but their 'news' service is unregulated and the journalists who work there have no independence at all.

The Mayor's claim that the establishment of *Bundaberg Now* was, *"in response to ongoing media fragmentation and decline"* is dangerously misleading, as Bundaberg was (and still is) very well served by independent news publishers including the ABC and NewsCorp at the time of its creation.

The much-publicised closure of NewsCorp newspapers in regional Queensland happened after Bundaberg Regional Council withdrew its advertising support for local news services.

However, since the closure of the printed version of NewsCorp's local newspaper (Bundaberg News-Mail), a new, vibrant independent newspaper – Bundaberg Today (a CPA member) – has successfully been established, as part of the broader revival of independent newspapers in Queensland.



A0039941U
ABN 24 502 081 084

PRESIDENT

s 47F

Plains Producer

Telephone: s 47F

Email: s @plainsproducer.com.au

MELBOURNE SECRETARIAT

1st floor, 163 Epsom Road, Flemington 3031
Postal Address: Locked Bag 1000, Ascot Vale, 3032
Telephone: (03) 8387 5500
Facsimile: (03) 9372 2792
Email: s 47F @vcpa.com.au

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

s 47F

Minister, in addition to the concerns raised by the QCPA, we believe *Bundaberg Now* sets a dangerous precedent that may be copied elsewhere, and we would appreciate an opportunity to discuss our concerns with you in person and at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,

s 47F

President
And Managing Director,
Plains Producer
0407715593

Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Communications.
Australian Government

RE: Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) 'news' publishing division, *Bundaberg Now*.

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I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this further on behalf of the members of the QCPA.

Sincerely

s 47F

President QCPA

Cc: Secretary QCPA
cc: ask@lgaq.asn.au



Office of the Mayor
PO Box 3130 Bundaberg QLD 4670
s 47F
1300 883 699
bundaberg.qld.gov.au

15 January 2021

Senate Economics Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to: Senate Economics Legislation Committee
From: Cr Jack Dempsey, Mayor of Bundaberg Regional Council
On the: Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms
Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020.

The Bill ~~in its~~ **current** form provides excessive powers to interfere in a free market and risks stifling innovation. It does not guarantee that local news content will increase in regional markets and perversely could reduce it. The Bill is based on the false premise that a bargaining power imbalance exists between digital platform services and Australian news businesses.

The reality is that news businesses need digital platforms to succeed and flourish. It's a mutually beneficial relationship between the news publisher and the digital platforms. Instead of mandatory bargaining, the Bill should provide a voluntary code overseen by an independent panel.

Our experience in the Bundaberg Region is relevant to the committee's deliberations.

In February 2019, Bundaberg Regional Council established Bundaberg Now (www.bundabergnow.com) as a community news service. This was in response to ongoing media fragmentation and decline. In the Bundaberg Region over the past three years, two newspapers have closed (Guardian and NewsMail), the WIN TV local news service has ceased and the remaining TV news services (Seven and Nine) have shed half their staff. Neither of the two local commercial radio stations have journalists based in the Bundaberg Region.

There's no conclusive evidence that Big Tech (eg Google and Facebook) are to blame for this. Television has been impacted by government policy to enable more free-to-air channels as well as streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Newspaper revenues have been slashed by online competition for classifieds, employment, real estate and car sales, etc as much as they have by news consumers migrating online. Google can't be blamed for the "rivers of gold" being dried up by Seek, eBay, etc.



Traditional media companies have partly adapted to the changed landscape by diversifying into online services, eg News Corp's investment in www.realestate.com.au and Kayo, and Nine's in Stan.

Traditional media companies have made commercial decisions to withdraw from regional markets for a range of reasons, not exclusively caused by Google and Facebook. In many places, the plug was pulled suddenly at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, leaving communities disconnected at a critical time. As subsequently seen, many start-up ventures have succeeded in print and online, often utilising social media and Google to promote their operations and build an audience.

The Bill now seeks to subsidise failed business models (large traditional media companies) by requiring successful businesses (digital platforms) to pay for access to content they don't necessarily need.

Technology is currently available for news publishers to prevent their content being indexed by Google and most choose to operate Facebook accounts which link to their content behind paywalls.

The committee should be mindful of unintended consequences, including reduced choice for consumers and damage to new media entrants and innovative publishing models such as Bundaberg Now.

Bundaberg Now willingly chooses to utilise Google and Facebook to share news and maximise engagement. Both platforms have helped to extend audience reach and Facebook referrals account for approximately half the website traffic.

At 14 January 2021, the Bundaberg Now Facebook page had 28,000 likes from a catchment population of just under 100,000 people and according to Google Analytics the website receives about 100,000 unique visitors per month. Bundaberg Now has been recognised as a legitimate news source by Google, Facebook and Microsoft.

The requirements to be recognised as a news source by Google are broader and fairer than those proposed in the Bill. For example, Google requires evidence of original content and policies for fact checking and privacy. Under the Bill's provisions to be recognised as a news service, it's feasible a company could use mostly syndicated content in a regional market and provide limited local employment as "local" isn't defined.

Bundaberg Regional Council does not seek payment from any digital platform to share or republish news from Bundaberg Now because we derive benefit from this.

Even if Council did seek compensation for news being shared on digital platforms, it appears we would not qualify as a publisher. The Bill requires the applicant to be a "corporation" and includes a revenue test which would seem to preclude a Council-owned or non-profit news service, also sole-trader operators who may establish in smaller markets.

The Bill appears to favour large traditional media enterprises and risks stifling smaller and innovative alternative publishers.

Since the withdrawal from many regional markets by News Corp and Nine, numerous small publishers have emerged, many of whom use digital platforms to extend their reach and engagement. It's not clear they need this Bill or that they will gain from its provisions any way.

There's a risk that if digital platforms withdraw from the Australian market or change their treatment of news, there would be more harm to small independent publishers than large ones.

If Bundaberg Now didn't have access to Google and Facebook to share content, it's likely that fewer people would read and watch the community news we provide. However, News Corp has already exited the Bundaberg market as a print publisher and its online edition uses a lot of syndicated content which is mostly behind a paywall.

It's difficult to discern in the Bundaberg market how this Bill will provide any benefit to local news consumers. As for local publishers in Bundaberg, there's a new print entrant who seems to be successful in the current operating environment while News Corp has five staff working on a syndicated online site with a hot desk in the CBD and no physical office after closing its newspapers.

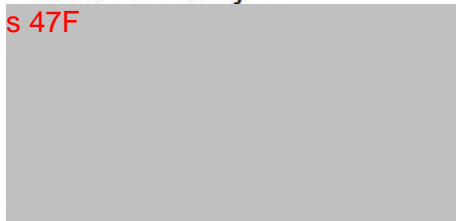
The media market in Bundaberg has realigned itself without any interference or assistance required by the Commonwealth Government.

The Bill can't address a non-existent power imbalance between news publishers and digital platforms, but risks creating a power imbalance between small news publishers and large ones.

Mandatory bargaining should be removed from the Bill and a voluntary code implemented instead.

Yours faithfully

s 47F



Mayor - Bundaberg Regional Council

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 1:52:07 PM

From: Minister Hogan

Sent: Mon, 6 Sep 2021 12:33:26

To: S @plainsproducer.com.au

Cc: DLO

Subject: MC21-005611 - 47F [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Sensitivity: Normal

Attachments:

MC21-005611 - s 47F - Country Press Association.pdf

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon,

Please find attached correspondence from Assistant Minister Hogan.

Regards

Office of the Hon Kevin Hogan MP

Assistant Minister to the Deputy Prime Minister

Assistant Minister for Local Government

Federal Member for Page

t 02 6277 4746

OFFICIAL



The Hon Kevin Hogan MP

Assistant Minister to the Deputy Prime Minister
Assistant Minister for Local Government
Federal Member for Page

Ref: MC21-005611

s 47F

President, Country Press Australia
am@plainsproducer.com.au

Dear Mr Manuel

Thank you for your letter of 3 August 2021 regarding concerns you share with the Queensland Country Press Association (QCPA) about Bundaberg Regional Council's online news platform, *Bundaberg Now*.

As the closest tier of government to the community, local governments have a critical role in delivering vital services and ensuring quality of life for communities across Australia in good times and bad. In the last year alone, councils have helped their communities through droughts, bushfires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The states and the Northern Territory have exercised their legislative authority to establish local governments and pass laws that outline their responsibilities, which includes regulating their local governments.

If you believe Bundaberg Regional Council is operating outside its legal authority, in the first instance I would encourage you to raise your concerns with the Queensland Deputy Premier and Minister for Local Government, the Hon Dr Steven Miles MP.

There are also some national media regulators and industry associations that may be able to assist, including the following organisations:

The Australian Communications and Media Authority

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is an independent Commonwealth statutory authority that regulates communications and media services in Australia across telecommunications, broadcasting, radio communications and the internet. Further information can be found at www.acma.gov.au.

Australian Press Council

The Australian Press Council is responsible for promoting good standards of media practice, community access to information of public interest, and freedom of expression through the media. The Council is the principal body with responsibility for responding to complaints about Australian newspapers, magazines and associated digital outlets. Further information can be found at www.presscouncil.org.au.

Independent Media Council

The Independent Media Council handles complaints by readers against funding bodies, publishers and publications. The council has a code of conduct for print and online print media publishers, and further information can be found at www.independentmediacouncil.com.au.

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is an independent Commonwealth statutory authority, which serves as Australia's competition and consumer regulator. The ACCC promotes competition and fair trade in markets to benefit consumers, businesses, and the community. The ACCC's primary responsibility is to ensure individuals and businesses comply with Australian competition, fair trading, and consumer protection laws, in particular the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010*.

On 20 April 2020, the Australian Government asked the ACCC to develop a mandatory code of conduct to address bargaining power imbalances between Australian news media business and digital platforms, specifically Google and Facebook.

The *Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021* was passed by both houses on 25 February 2021. The new Act amends the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010* by establishing a mandatory code of conduct that applies to news media businesses and digital platform corporations when bargaining in relation to news content made available by digital platform services. Further information is available at www.accc.gov.au.

I have also copied the Hon Paul Fletcher MP, Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts into this letter for his information.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention and I trust this is of assistance.

Yours sincerely



Kevin Hogan

2 / 9 / 2021

cc The Hon Paul Fletcher MP, Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 1:51:20 PM

From: Minister

Sent: Tue, 21 Sep 2021 16:24:33


To: s 47F @starnewsgroup.com.au

Cc: Minister

Subject: MC21-004811 - Correspondence from Minister Fletcher [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Sensitivity: Normal

Attachments:

MC21-004811.pdf 

OFFICIAL

Good afternoon

Please find attached correspondence from Minister Fletcher.

No hard copy will follow.

Kind regards

s 47F

Office of the Hon Paul Fletcher MP

Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts

Member for Bradfield

OFFICIAL



PAUL FLETCHER MP

Federal Member for Bradfield
Minister for Communications,
Urban Infrastructure,
Cities & the Arts

MC21-004811

s 47F

President
Queensland Country Press Association
PO Box 3212
Victoria Point West QLD 4165

Dear s 47F:

Thank you for your letter of 29 July 2021 on behalf of the members of the Queensland Country Press Association (QCPA) concerning the Bundaberg Regional Council's online publication "*Bundaberg Now*". I also understand that you wrote to the Hon Kevin Hogan MP, Assistant Minister for Local Government, about this matter on 3 August 2021.

You have raised a number of concerns held by the QCPA about this publication, including that it appears to "present itself as an independent local news service". You advise that QCPA members hold a number of concerns about the manner in which the publication is managed, including that it lacks transparency, may influence the outcome of local elections, and is a risk to democratic principles.

While the majority of these matters fall outside my portfolio responsibilities, and are in fact matters for the Queensland Government, I would like to provide a response and propose some pathways forward for the QCPA to address the assertion that *Bundaberg Now* is purporting to be an independent source of local news.

I agree with the QCPA that key aspects of the operation of *Bundaberg Now* raise serious concerns from the perspective of those who recognise the importance of independent, sustainable media outlets being able to hold Government to account. In particular, it is troubling that this publication is presented to give the impression of being an independent news organisation when in fact it is fully funded by the Bundaberg Regional Council and its coverage of the Mayor and the Council verges on hagiographic.

That being said, while there is a strong public policy interest in a free press, we do not have a policy mechanism in the communications policy space to deal with media outlets which claim to be independent but in fact are not. To have such mechanisms would in my view raise more problems than it would solve; it would be undesirable for example to have a process in which government certified particular media outlets as being independent.

In my view, the more fruitful avenues for scrutiny include whether the Bundaberg Regional Council or *Bundaberg Now* is engaging in misleading and deceptive conduct under the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010*; and whether such expenditure by the Bundaberg Regional Council is appropriate or permissible under Queensland's *Local Government Act 2009*.

A strong and vibrant news media sector is critical to the health of Australia's democracy; an informed citizenry is a prerequisite for political, social and cultural participation. The Morrison Government supports a diverse and sustainable media sector, and recognises that quality news and public interest journalism play an important role in the functioning of Australian society and democracy, and are essential to informing local communities.

That is why the Government acted swiftly to support the regional media sector when the COVID-19 pandemic began, including making \$50 million in grants available to regional media organisations under the Public Interest News Gathering program, and an additional \$5 million to support the continuation of the AAP news wire service.

Print media in Australia is largely self-regulated. As members of the Australian Press Council (APC), the independent oversight body for print media, you and your fellow QCPA members could make a complaint to the APC about the publication.

While *Bundaberg Now* is not a member of the APC, the APC has a role in monitoring and evaluating trends and developments that may adversely impact the Australian public's right to know and may be an appropriate recipient of a complaint from the QCPA on this matter.

The practice of local and regional councils and governments producing material that provides the public with information about their activities is not novel. Access to a diversity of voices provides a critical safeguard against undue influence over Australia's public discourse and democratic system. I note that in addition to the range of radio and television broadcasts available in the region, there are a number of print publications available in the Bundaberg region that contribute to allowing for a diversity of voices. In addition to the nation-wide and Queensland-based print publications, I note that the following print publications are available in the Bundaberg area: the *Bundaberg Today*; the *Fraser Coast Chronicle*; the *Coastline Bundaberg*; and the *Childers Chitchat*.

Turning to the QCPA's concerns about the way that Bundaberg Regional Council operates as a local government council, I consider that it would be appropriate for the QCPA to raise these issues with the Queensland State Government, through the Minister for Local Government or the Department of Local Government, Racing and Multicultural Affairs. The State Minister administers the legislative arrangements that apply to the operations of local government and to local Councillors. Should the material of concern also relate in some way to the re-election of Councillors, then the QCPA may also wish to raise their concerns with the Queensland Electoral Commission.

A copy of this letter has been provided to the Hon. Kevin Hogan MP, the Assistant Minister for Local Government, for his information.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. I hope the information in this letter is of some help.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Fletcher', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Paul Fletcher

20/9/2021

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 1:45:52 PM

From: s 47F

Sent: Tue, 7 Dec 2021 10:56:11

To: Minister

Subject: Bundaberg Now - Country Press Association Draft Media Release

Sensitivity: High

Attachments:

Fletcher Paul MP - Bundaberg Now - Country Press Association Draft Media Release (A6213617).pdf 01 Bundaberg Now Dec 3.pdf

Good Morning

Please find attached letter from Mayor Jack Dempsey for the Hon Paul Fletcher MP.

Regards

s

s 47F

\itap2Executive Assistant – Mayor

T s 47F

\itap2E s 47F @bundaberg.qld.gov.au

\itap2



2

[\itap2](#)

[\itap2](#)



\itap2

This email and/or associated attachments and links may contain confidential, privileged or personal information. If you are not an intended recipient, you must not deal with or rely on any information herein and please advise the sender or call Council on 1300 883 699. Council undertakes virus protection but excludes all liability for transmission any potential viruses (or similar). Council may collect your personal information which will be used for the purposes outlined in this communication. This information will only be accessed by authorised Council officers and will be handled in accordance with Council's Privacy Statement governed by the Information Privacy Act 2009. Visit <https://www.bundaberg.qld.gov.au/privacy> for further information.

7 December 2021

Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Minister for Communications, Urban Infrastructure, Cities and the Arts
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: minister@communications.gov.au

Dear Minister

Country Press Australia has written to me and enclosed a draft media release (attached) which quotes comments from yourself in relation to Bundaberg Now (www.bundabergnow.com).

I'm writing to ask if the reported quotes are accurate and in proper context, or are they misleading?

If so, why has there been no contact from yourself, your office, or your Department to Bundaberg Regional Council in relation to any of these reported concerns.

Bundaberg Now aggregates Council news in a single platform, which is available to the community, other organisations and businesses to also utilise within published guidelines. The platform doesn't purport to be anything except "a free community website delivering good news online — an initiative of Bundaberg Regional Council".

The website was established in January 2019 after News Corp began placing all its online content behind a paywall, including Council media releases, weather reports and contributed community news. This followed years of commercial media decline and closures in the Bundaberg Region. In April 2020, News Corp withdrew from publishing a print edition of the locally circulating NewsMail and Bundaberg Now played an essential role in keeping the community informed during the early stages of the pandemic.

The Melbourne-based Today Group began publishing a weekly newspaper (Bundaberg Today) in September 2020, more than 18 months after Bundaberg Now was established.

I'm disappointed if you have formed a view based on representations from a commercial media outlet and their industry representatives without hearing from Council and considering all the facts.

Do you hold a similar view about www.afl.com.au and its publication of news related to the sporting code it promotes? The difference with Bundaberg Now is that Council makes its platform available to the community. If the website closed tomorrow, many important stories would go untold and Council's communications with its own residents would be severely impacted.

There are several media outlets in Bundaberg which provide third-party coverage of Council news, events and activities including the ABC, News Corp, two commercial radio stations and Bundaberg Today. None of these organisations have the resources, the capacity or desire to publish all the information which appears on Bundaberg Now.



In 2019, Council made a strategic decision to move away from printed newsletters and traditional media releases to communicate directly online with residents.

As the Minister responsible for Australia Post, you'd be aware that household deliveries have become less frequent, more expensive and less reliable, especially in regional areas.

Council's corporate plan 2021-26 includes a commitment to open communication, and:

- High community engagement with social media platforms and Council websites.
- Innovative utilisation of data and technology to encourage community engagement.

Bundaberg Regional Council is transparent about its ownership of Bundaberg Now and purpose, see: <https://www.bundaberg.qld.gov.au/bundaberg-now>

There have been zero complaints received by Council in relation to bias or false information on Bundaberg Now.

I note from your maiden speech in 2010 that you were a strong supporter of local government when you entered Parliament.

You believed that local communities "face governments, state and federal, which are profoundly unsympathetic — governments with an instinct to regulate and intervene, governments with a misplaced conviction that they know best."

As the Minister for Communications, I expect you are also aware that innovation is key to meeting the challenge of communicating in the digital age, where traditional media is in decline, fake news abounds and there's significant noise in the online environment.

Council remains open to improving and adapting its services to meet community needs and the operating environment.

Please let me know if you have been misquoted by the Country Press Association, and if you'd like to discuss these matters.

Yours sincerely

s 47F

Jack Dempsey
Mayor - Bundaberg Regional Council

Enc. Country Press Australia Draft Media Release



Federal Minister for Communications concerned about Bundaberg Regional Council's 'news' platform, *Bundaberg Now*.

The federal minister for communications Paul Fletcher believes that key aspects of the operation of Bundaberg Regional Council's 'news' platform Bundaberg Now *'raise serious concerns from the perspective of those who recognise the importance of independent sustainable media outlets being able to hold Government to account.'*

In a letter of response sent to the president of the Queensland Country Press Association, Minister Fletcher said *"..it is troubling that this publication [Bundaberg Now] is presented to give the impression of being an independent news organisation when in fact it is fully funded by the Bundaberg Regional Council and its coverage of the Mayor and the Council verges on hagiographic."*

The president of Country Press Australia (CPA) Andrew Manuel said he welcomed the Minister's support and called on Bundaberg Regional Council to close down its 'news' division on the grounds it is misleading and inappropriate for a local government to own and control a news outlet that reports on itself.

"Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) is the only council in Australia that owns and directly operates its own large scale multi-media 'news' division, and we welcome the support of the Minister for Communications as we ramp up our campaign to have it stopped ", said Andrew Manuel.

"Bundaberg Now presents itself publicly as an independent local news service, but it's not. It's owned and controlled by Council, and concerningly it now appears that the local government in Bundaberg spend more ratepayer money on journalism staff and 'news' resources than any genuine independent news media organisation in Bundaberg, including the ABC, which is extraordinary and entirely inappropriate", he said.

Andrew Manuel said the journalists employed by BRC to produce the 'news' for Bundaberg Now have no independence from political interference.

"The central tenant of independent news is giving journalists the independence to ask tough questions of the powerful, and to hold governments and politicians to account, but there has never been one story published on Bundaberg Now about the Mayor or Council that has been anything but glowingly positive." he said.

Andrew Manuel said it's a great concern that BRC are obviously investing millions of dollars of ratepayer money to produce local 'news' when there is already a vibrant and diverse independent local news media sector serving the Bundaberg region.

Mr Manuel says there are several specific concerns held by the members of the CPA, including secrecy around the editorial control of Bundaberg Now and BRC's refusal to provide operating costs for Bundaberg Now.



Minister Fletcher has recommended these concerns be taken up with the ACCC, Queensland Electoral Commission, Australian Press Council and the Queensland Minister for Local Government.

"While the majority of these matters fall outside my portfolio responsibilities, and are in fact matters for the Queensland Government, I would like to provide a response and propose some pathways forward for the QCPA to address the assertion that Bundaberg Now is purporting to be an independent source of local news", said Minister Fletcher.

The CPA have said they intend to follow the Minister's advice.

"This has galvanised support from the entire independent regional news media industry in Australia. The ABC has labelled Bundaberg Now as a propaganda machine and we have several leading media and legal academics supporting our campaign. In our letter to Minister Fletcher and others I warned that we believe our concerns about Bundaberg Now are a 'canary in the coal mine' type warning and we are concerned for the fundamentals of democracy at a community level if this type of service is duplicated elsewhere."

Ends

About CPA

- The Country Press Association (CPA) is the peak industry body representing regional news media publishers in Australia
- QCPA is the Queensland affiliate of Country Press Australia
- QCPA membership has grown significantly in the past year with a revival of independent newspapers in Qld underway.

For further information or interview, contact:

s 47F

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 2:42:23 PM
From: s 47E(d) [redacted]
Sent: Mon, 13 Dec 2021 15:20:53
To: s 47E(d) [redacted]
Subject: FW: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]
Sensitivity: Normal

UNOFFICIAL

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47E(d) [redacted]
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 3:26 PM
To: 's 47F' [redacted] <[redacted]@abc.net.au>
Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

Many thanks s [redacted]. The quotes in the release are accurate but we'll leave it at that.

s [redacted]

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47F [redacted] <[redacted]@abc.net.au>
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 2:56 PM
To: s 47E(d) [redacted] <[redacted]@communications.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now

Hi s [redacted]

Would Minister Fletcher be available for a radio interview tomorrow morning? At either 8am or 8:35 (AEST QLD time), alternatively one of our News team could do something in the next couple of hours.

We are planning to cover this tomorrow morning, so if an interview isn't possible could we please get a statement by COB today.

Thanks again,

s [redacted]

From: s 47F [redacted]
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 12:49 PM
To: s 47E(d) [redacted] <[redacted]@communications.gov.au>
Subject: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now

Hi s [redacted]

As discussed here is the press release from Country Press Australia that includes mention of a letter from Minister Fletcher.

Is Minister Fletcher able to please provide a statement, and can you confirm the quotes are from the Minister's correspondence?

Thanks,

s 47F [redacted]

s 47F [redacted]

Producer, Breakfast
ABC Wide Bay

P: s 47F

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians
and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.



Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 2:42:30 PM

From: s 47E(d)

Sent: Mon, 13 Dec 2021 15:21:09

To: s 47E(d)

Subject: FW: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

Sensitivity: Normal

UNOFFICIAL

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47E(d)

Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 3:23 PM

To: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

Thank you!

UNOFFICIAL

From: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 3:20 PM

To: s 47E(d) <@communications.gov.au>; Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

Hi s

Can confirm each quote in the release reflects the Minister's letter to Mr Phill Le Petit, President of the Queensland Country Press Association.

Thanks,

s

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47E(d) <@communications.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 3:10 PM

To: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

Thanks, really just asking if this was in the Minister's letter:

"While the majority of these matters fall outside my portfolio responsibilities, and are in fact matters for the Queensland Government, I would like to provide a response and propose some pathways forward for the QCPA to address the assertion that Bundaberg Now is purporting to be an independent source of local news", said Minister Fletcher

UNOFFICIAL

From: Media <media@communications.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 2:26 PM
To: s 47E(d) <[REDACTED]@communications.gov.au>; Media <media@communications.gov.au>
Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>
Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

Hi s [REDACTED]

Confirming we're looking into this for you and will return the fact-checked release ASAP.

Thanks,
s [REDACTED]

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47E(d) <[REDACTED]@communications.gov.au>
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 1:59 PM
To: Media <media@communications.gov.au>
Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>
Subject: FW: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]
Importance: High

UNOFFICIAL

Hi all – the quotes in the attached media release look accurate (and I know the first two are accurate) but would you please check the final one against the Minister's letter?

s [REDACTED]

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47F <[REDACTED]@abc.net.au>
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 1:49 PM
To: Salusinszky, Imre <Imre.salusinszky@communications.gov.au>
Subject: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now

Hi s [REDACTED]

As discussed here is the press release from Country Press Australia that includes mention of a letter from Minister Fletcher.

Is Minister Fletcher able to please provide a statement, and can you confirm the quotes are from the Minister's correspondence?

Thanks,

s 47F [REDACTED]

47F [REDACTED]

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 2:43:15 PM

From: s 47E(d)

Sent: Mon, 13 Dec 2021 15:21:18

To: s 47E(d)

Subject: FW: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

Sensitivity: Normal

UNOFFICIAL

UNOFFICIAL

From: s 47E(d)

Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 3:10 PM

To: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

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UNOFFICIAL

From: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 2:26 PM

To: s 47E(d) <@communications.gov.au>; Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>

Subject: RE: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

UNOFFICIAL

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Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 1:59 PM

To: Media <media@communications.gov.au>

Cc: Gannon, Bridget <Bridget.Gannon@infrastructure.gov.au>; DLO <DLO@communications.gov.au>

Subject: FW: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]

Importance: High

UNOFFICIAL

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S

UNOFFICIAL

From: S 47F <[redacted]@abc.net.au>
Sent: Thursday, 9 December 2021 1:49 PM
To: S 47E(d) <[redacted]@communications.gov.au>
Subject: Country Press Australia release re Bundaberg Now

Hi S

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Is Minister Fletcher able to please provide a statement, and can you confirm the quotes are from the Minister's correspondence?

Thanks,

S 47F

47F

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.

Archived: Wednesday, 15 December 2021 2:43:31 PM

From: s 47E(d)

Sent: Tue, 14 Dec 2021 15:31:31

To: s 47E(d)

Subject: FW: Printing request [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Sensitivity: Normal

Attachments:

MC21-004811.docx  MC - MPS - PDR Info Sheet.docx  Original Correspondence - Letter (8).pdf  MC21-004811 - Minister-s redraft comments.pdf 

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

From: s 47E @COMMUNICATIONS.gov.au>

Sent: Friday, 17 September 2021 2:28 PM

To: s 47E @communications.gov.au>

Subject: Printing request [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Hi s 47E

Hoping you can help me with this one this afternoon.

The attached redrafted Min Rep appears to have been mislaid – would you please print for the Minister’s signature and put in his corro signing tray?

Order is as follows:

1. PDR sheet
2. Redraft comments folded in half
3. Min Rep
4. Original correspondence

Thanks and I apologise for the inconvenience.

Regards

s

OFFICIAL

MC21-004811

s 47F

President
Queensland Country Press Association
PO Box 3212
Victoria Point West QLD 4165

Dear Mr s 47F

Thank you for your letter of 29 July 2021 on behalf of the members of the Queensland Country Press Association (QCPA) concerning the Bundaberg Regional Council's online publication "*Bundaberg Now*". I also understand that you wrote to the Hon Kevin Hogan MP, Assistant Minister for Local Government, about this matter on 3 August 2021.

You have raised a number of concerns held by the QCPA about this publication, including that it appears to "present itself as an independent local news service". You advise that QCPA members hold a number of concerns about the manner in which the publication is managed, including that it lacks transparency, may influence the outcome of local elections, and is a risk to democratic principles.

While the majority of these matters fall outside my portfolio responsibilities, and are in fact matters for the Queensland Government, I would like to provide a response and propose some pathways forward for the QCPA to address the assertion that *Bundaberg Now* is purporting to be an independent source of local news.

I agree with the QCPA that key aspects of the operation of *Bundaberg Now* raise serious concerns from the perspective of those who recognise the importance of independent, sustainable media outlets being able to hold Government to account. In particular, it is troubling that this publication is presented to give the impression of being an independent news organisation when in fact it is fully funded by the Bundaberg Regional Council and its coverage of the Mayor and the Council verges on hagiographic.

That being said, while there is a strong public policy interest in a free press, we do not have a policy mechanism in the communications policy space to deal with media outlets which claim to be independent but in fact are not. To have such mechanisms would in my view raise more problems than it would solve; it would be undesirable for example to have a process in which government certified particular media outlets as being independent.

In my view, the more fruitful avenues for scrutiny include whether the Bundaberg Regional Council or *Bundaberg Now* is engaging in misleading and deceptive conduct under the *Competition and Consumer Act 2010*; and whether such expenditure by the Bundaberg Regional Council is appropriate or permissible under Queensland's *Local Government Act 2009*.

A strong and vibrant news media sector is critical to the health of Australia's democracy; an informed citizenry is a prerequisite for political, social and cultural participation. The Morrison Government supports a diverse and sustainable media sector, and recognises that quality news and public interest journalism play an important role in the functioning of Australian society and democracy, and are essential to informing local communities.

That is why the Government acted swiftly to support the regional media sector when the COVID-19 pandemic began, including making \$50 million in grants available to regional media organisations under the Public Interest News Gathering program, and an additional \$5 million to support the continuation of the AAP news wire service.

Print media in Australia is largely self-regulated. As members of the Australian Press Council (APC), the independent oversight body for print media, you and your fellow QCPA members could make a complaint to the APC about the publication. While *Bundaberg Now* is not a member of the APC, the APC has a role in monitoring and evaluating trends and developments that may adversely impact the Australian public's right to know and may be an appropriate recipient of a complaint from the QCPA on this matter.

The practice of local and regional councils and governments producing material that provides the public with information about their activities is not novel. Access to a diversity of voices provides a critical safeguard against undue influence over Australia's public discourse and democratic system. I note that in addition to the range of radio and television broadcasts available in the region, there are a number of print publications available in the Bundaberg region that contribute to allowing for a diversity of voices. In addition to the nation-wide and Queensland-based print publications, I note that the following print publications are available in the Bundaberg area: the *Bundaberg Today*; the *Fraser Coast Chronicle*; the *Coastline Bundaberg*; and the *Childers Chitchat*.

Turning to the QCPA's concerns about the way that Bundaberg Regional Council operates as a local government council, I consider that it would be appropriate for the QCPA to raise these issues with the Queensland State Government, through the Minister for Local Government or the Department of Local Government, Racing and Multicultural Affairs. The State Minister administers the legislative arrangements that apply to the operations of local government and to local Councillors. Should the material of concern also relate in some way to the re-election of Councillors, then the QCPA may also wish to raise their concerns with the Queensland Electoral Commission.

A copy of this letter has been provided to the Hon. Kevin Hogan MP, the Assistant Minister for Local Government, for his information.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. I hope the information in this letter is of some help.

Yours sincerely

Paul Fletcher

/ / 2021

PDR #	MC21-004811	Minister Requested Redraft	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		Advisor Requested Redrafts	<input type="checkbox"/>
Received in MO	29 July 2021	First sent to MO for clearance	26 August 2021
Received in Dept.	29 July 2021		
MO Clearance	47E	Submitted for Adviser Clearance	26 August 2021
		MO Cleared Date	29 August 2021
SES Officer: Position & Division	Mike Makin AS News and Media Industry	Phone	P: (02) 6271 1031 M: s 47E
Overdue reason	Was waiting on Minister meeting with Keith Pitt on Bundaberg Now issue, held 10 Aug.		
Adviser Comments			
Minister Comments			



PAUL FLETCHER MP

Federal Member for Bradfield
Minister for Communications,
Urban Infrastructure,
Cities & the Arts

s 47C

MC21-004811

Mr s 47F
President
Queensland Country Press Association
PO Box 3212
Victoria Point West QLD 4165

Dear s 47F

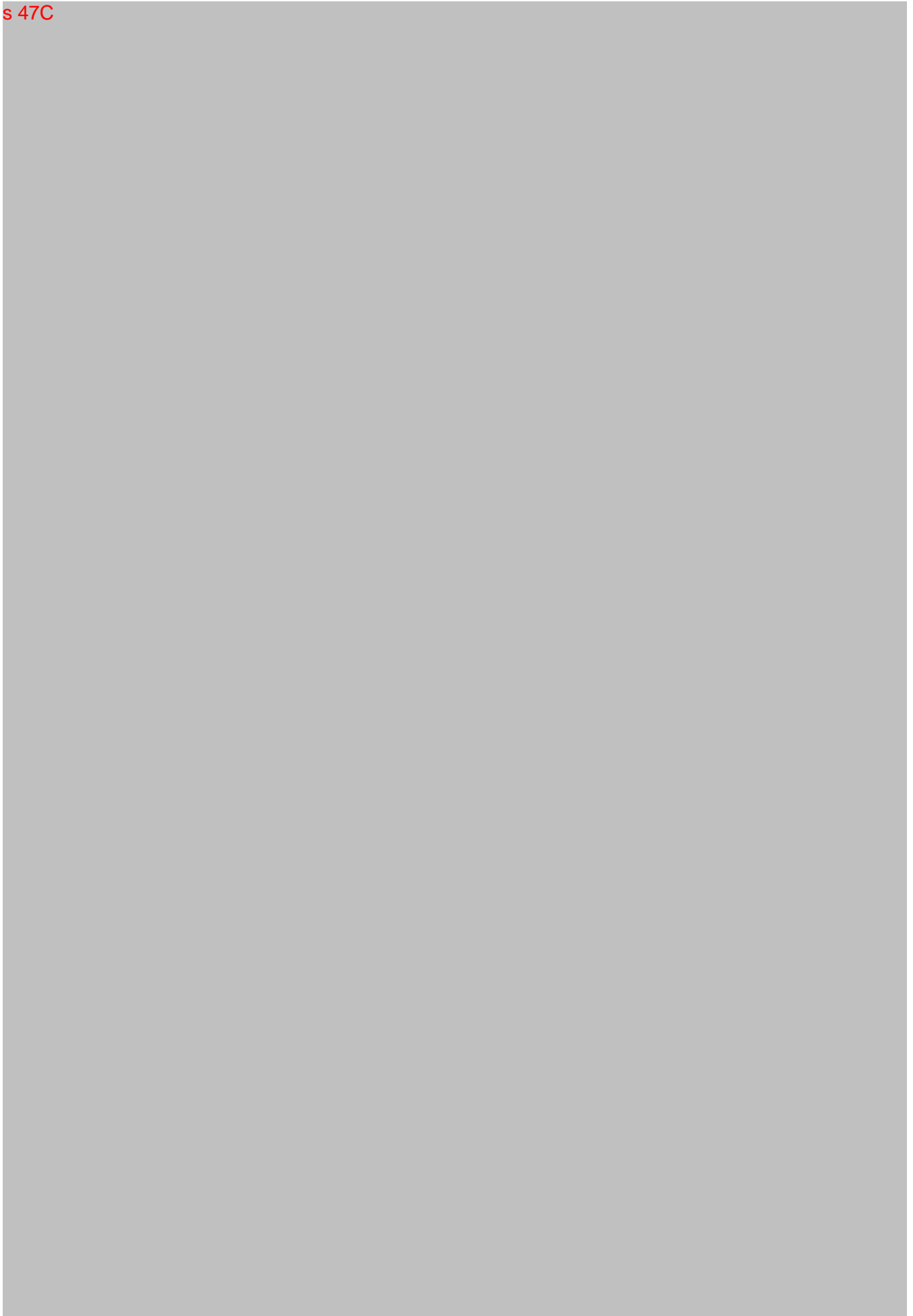
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Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention.

Yours sincerely

Paul Fletcher

/ / 2021

Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Communications.
Australian Government

RE: Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) 'news' publishing division, *Bundaberg Now*.

Dear Minister Fletcher,

I'm writing on behalf of the members of the Queensland Country Press Association (QCPA) to seek an urgent meeting to discuss concerns we have about the conduct of Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) with regard to the operations of its controversial 'news' media division, *Bundaberg Now*. (See www.bundabergnow.com.au)

About Bundaberg Now

The Bundaberg Regional Council is the only council in Australia we are aware of that owns and directly operates its own large scale multi-media 'news' division. *Bundaberg Now* publishes several well-resourced and professionally produced 'news' stories per day across multiple media platforms covering everything from local sport and community news to business profiles. (Only a very small number of the stories published are Council related)

Bundaberg Now presents itself publicly as an independent local news service and concerningly is now the largest and best resourced 'news' publisher in Bundaberg. BRC employs more people to produce 'news' for *Bundaberg Now* than the ABC does in Bundaberg to produce independent news for the entire Wide Bay region!

However, unlike the ABC that has its own board of directors and a fiercely protected Charter of Independence to ensure journalists can ask tough questions of politicians, *Bundaberg Now* journalists have no independence at all, and the editorial content is directly controlled by Council itself. Despite presenting as an independent source of local news, there has never been one story published on *Bundaberg Now* that critically questions anything about the conduct of Council and/or Councillors.

Bundaberg Now has understandably attracted a large audience as it provides useful, interesting and professionally produced local 'news' content for 'free', and the *Bundaberg Now* Facebook page has more than 31,000 followers.

This makes Bundaberg Now a very powerful tool for BRC, and we believe that power is dangerous and is being abused.

Freedom of the press, the Fourth Estate, is democracy's correcting mechanism against corruption, and *Bundaberg Now* is undermining freedom of the press, and democracy in Bundaberg, and its existence sets a dangerous precedent.

Bundaberg Council is not the first to try this. It is on the public record that the idea for *Bundaberg Now* came from Ipswich, when disgraced former Mayor Paul Pisasale (since jailed for corruption) established a similar 'news' service called *Ipswich First*. Importantly, *Bundaberg Now* operates on a much larger scale than *Ipswich First* ever did, and pleasingly *Ipswich First* has since been reduced to reporting council updates, and its entire existence is the subject of review by the new Mayor and Council.

Specific concerns that we'd like to discuss are as follows:

1. Abandonment of Freedom of Press principles

- Unlike other councils, BRC no longer follows typical government media protocols.
- BRC now bypasses the analysis and scrutiny of local independent journalists by directly publishing their one-sided and self-serving media releases as 'news' to an unsuspecting public via their mass audience on Bundaberg Now.
- The local independent news media (ABC, News-Mail, Bundaberg Today and others) are now relegated to trying to correct the public record when important Council announcements are made.
- ABC Media Watch and ABC Wide Bay have labelled Bundaberg Now a 'propaganda machine'.

2. Secrecy around editorial control

- Despite repeated questions from local independent media about who makes editorial decisions for Bundaberg Now, and on what basis, BRC refuses to provide answers.
- ABC Wide Bay requested the Mayor appear on local radio to discuss/debate the editorial processes (and other matters relating to Bundaberg Now) but he refused to appear.
- The former Director of Communications of BRC, who was directly responsible for Bundaberg Now, is now the 'Chief of Staff' to the Mayor. A recent private email exchange (published under FOI) between a BRC Councillor (May Mitchell) and the CEO of BRC (Stephen Johnson) shows that Councillor Mitchell has serious concerns about the Mayor's Chief of Staff still being an administrator of the Bundaberg Now Facebook page. The published emails show that Cr Mitchell raised her concerns with the Department of Local Government, who confirmed her concerns were well founded and recommended that the Chief of Staff to the Mayor should have that access removed. When Cr Mitchell passed that advice on to the CEO, it was quickly dismissed.

3. Electoral interference risk

- The current Mayor is regularly featured positively in the 'news' on Bundaberg Now, but very few Councillors are.
- While it is common for incumbent Mayors to be the highest profile member of Council, Bundaberg Now publishes an artificially high number of stories featuring the Mayor and they are all positive. This biased media coverage is a significant distortion of the public reportage of his performance and gives him an unfair electoral advantage.
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4. Corruption risk

- Bundaberg Now regularly publishes local 'business' stories and profiles.
- BRC has repeatedly refused to provide answers to questions about who decides which businesses are featured (and enjoy invaluable local promotion for free) and on what basis.
- The local newspaper (and QCPA member) Bundaberg Today, is currently researching a story where it is alleged a building company owned by a family member of a prominent Councillor has been promoted many times on the site (effectively receiving tens of thousands of dollars of ratepayer funded promotion) but their competitors have never been promoted on the site. BRC refuses to provide direct answers to questions on this matter.

5. Refusal to provide operating costs of Bundaberg Now

- Bundaberg Now is the largest news service in Bundaberg, with more staff than the ABC.
- Despite repeated requests from local media and the public, BRC refuses to disclose the operating cost of Bundaberg Now, despite the fact it is clearly a major project.
- In 2019, the ABC estimated the cost at \$1.4million per year. Based on the output published by Bundaberg Now, \$1.4million would seem conservative.

We believe these concerns we've outlined regarding Bundaberg Now are a 'canary in the coal mine' type warning for the issues facing Local Government and the impact on the fundamentals of democracy at a community level if this type of service is duplicated elsewhere.

Minister, in addition to seeking a solution for these serious concerns about BRC's abuse of power with regard to Bundaberg Now, we'd like to have a broader discussion about the responsibilities, transparency and risks facing all Queensland Councils with public relations departments.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss this further on behalf of the members of the QCPA.

Sincerely

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President QCPA

Cc: Secretary QCPA
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