

Skewed media priorities

– lessons from the human rights consultation

By Clara Davies

Over the past 12 months, I have had considerable contact with the media and developed an insight. Often, I have considered myself fortunate to be talking on behalf of an organisation I have been proud to represent about issues that were topical and meaningful. For the most part, interviewers have displayed integrity and sympathy for the ALA's causes and beliefs. Nonetheless, I became increasingly disillusioned with many media outlets across this country, particularly the mainstream media, which captures the public's attention and has the power to distract from the real issues.

Over the past week, Melbourne media has been completely obsessed with the escalating Gordon Ramsay/Tracey Grimshaw feud – world-renowned celebrity chef vs local host of a current affairs show. The story has dominated the newspapers, talkback radio, news reports and prime-time television programs. It has been a ratings booster and sold publications. But how important is this story? The answer is, not at all. It is complete nonsense, compared with the vast array of fundamental issues that receive virtually no attention in the mainstream media.

In the same week, the National Human Rights Consultation has drawn to a close. Media coverage of this vitally important consultation has been very disappointing, to say the least. Why? Perhaps because the federal government has failed to effectively engage the media to promote widespread community involvement, and also because the Australian media

sees fundamental rights as a 'dull' issue that won't sell papers or boost ratings. Yet the National Consultation has attracted more submissions from the public than any other inquiry held in Australian history.

And while many major media outlets have been virtually silent on the Consultation and its core issues, some have seen it as an opportunity, but for all the wrong reasons. An opportunity to promote a one-sided agenda.

Throughout the course of the Consultation, *The Australian* newspaper has published countless stories arguing that rights are adequately protected in this country. High-profile opponents of formal rights protections have been provided with lofty soap boxes from which to strut their stuff, unchallenged and unopposed. Week after week, *The Australian* has effectively campaigned to convince us that a formal protective human rights document is not needed in this country. Why? We can only begin to imagine.

However, last week *The Australian* ran a short article about a 13-year-old Aboriginal boy who was held in police custody in 'sub-human' conditions for five days. The story detailed how 'many Indigenous children spent days in rundown police cells in remote Western Australia, at risk of both physical and sexual assault by adult prisoners, because the only two juvenile detention centres were in Perth'. A prime example of how the rights of a young boy are certainly not being adequately protected, yet *The Australian* continues to run anti-rights protection articles.

The mainstream media has a lot to answer for in this country. While the independent media does its



best to bring important issues to public attention, its impact is limited compared to that of the juggernauts.

I recently spoke to a journalist in Tennant Creek. She is 45 and has worked for a local paper, started by her Greek grandfather, her whole life. She has two children of her own, but has raised another 10 who have arrived on her doorstep from time to time. The latest child came to her at two weeks of age, from a 15-year-old girl. She said her community was in desperate need of a safe house where kids could come to have a bath, a meal and a bed, and where they knew they would be safe from abuse and rape. Many babies in her community were dying of septicaemia, due to the putrid conditions into which they were born, with the nearest hospital being 500km away in Alice Springs. Unfortunately, few media crews ever go to Tennant Creek, so these sad stories remain untold.

It is time that the mainstream media in this country started reporting on the real issues, not only because journalistic independence and integrity should trump hypocrisy and one-sided agendas, but because giving adequate coverage to the stories that matter can improve – or even save – lives. ■

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