

Australia not an 'anti-dobbing' culture: first whistleblowing survey results

Assumptions that Australia is an 'anti-dobbing' society with a culture hostile to whistleblowing have been revealed as a myth in first results released at the Australian launch of the **World Online Whistleblowing Survey** in Brisbane.

Conducted by Newspoll on 3-6 May for Griffith University and the University of Melbourne, the first stage of the survey shows overwhelming concern for whistleblowers, with 81% of adult Australians believing whistleblowers should be supported, rather than punished, for revealing inside information about serious wrongdoing.

But only 53% of the 1,211 respondents viewed Australian society as generally accepting of whistleblowing, and only 49% of organisation members were confident that their own organisation was serious about protecting people who speak up.

The Australian first stage survey questions are replicated and expanded in the more comprehensive **World Online Whistleblowing Survey** – the first international survey testing public views about whistleblowing to be run online.

Speaking at the survey launch, project leader **Professor A J Brown**, of Griffith University, said the Australian results confirm the vital need for formal, legal protection of whistleblowing, to bring legal and social standards into line with what citizens believe is right.

"While many plainly still believe that Australia has an 'anti-dobbing' culture, these first results suggest it is not true; Australians are actually just as – if not more – interested in justice for those prepared to bring serious wrongdoing to light," Professor Brown said.

Also speaking were principal researcher **Dr Suelette Dreyfus** of the University of Melbourne, and two of Australia's most important whistleblowers: former national security analyst and now Independent Federal MP, **Andrew Wilkie**, and **Toni Hoffman**, the nurse unit manager who exposed Bundaberg Hospital's infamous "Dr Death" case (quotes overleaf).

Dr Dreyfus said the global survey would help experts understand the changing nature of whistleblowing and whistleblower protection.

"When you see serious wrongdoing, should you be protected if you have to go to the media to expose it? What is the impact of new technology such as Twitter and Facebook? How do Australian attitudes and standards compare to other countries? This survey will help us answer these important questions," Dr Dreyfus said.

"The results will be crucial for all organisations interested in increasing their accessibility to whistleblowers, and the effectiveness of whistleblowing in society," Dr Dreyfus said.

The full survey, which can be answered by anyone, is at <https://whistleblowingsurvey.org>.

Further language versions of the survey will be launched in Europe in late June.

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Toni Hoffman said the new data was a wake-up call to governments on the need to provide employees with safe, effective and timely avenues for drawing attention to wrongdoing.

Ms Hoffman, who is also a committee member of Whistleblowers Australia, said organisations should not make it necessary for whistleblowers to go to the media.

“The survey shows that most Australians are sensible, and want a balanced approach,” Ms Hoffman said. “A majority (56%) believe the most effective way to get wrongdoing stopped is by reporting it to people in authority, via official channels.”

“However, 87% of adults think that a whistleblower should be able to go to the media if necessary, either when it becomes necessary or at least as a last resort. If people have to go public – like I did – it’s vital they are protected,” Ms Hoffman said.

Andrew Wilkie said he was surprised by the first stage results.

“I would have been one of the many Australians who believed that most people would put mateship, loyalty and respect for authority before a duty to speak up about suspected wrongdoing,” Mr Wilkie said.

“This snapshot of Australians’ values makes me feel far less alone.”

“However the data also reinforce the importance of moving to strengthen whistleblower protection in all our major institutions,” he said.

“How do we expect to maintain integrity in our institutions, if we don’t have formal systems for boosting the confidence of public servants or employees that something will be done if they report, and that they will be protected?” Mr Wilkie concluded.

Best practice whistleblower protection legislation for the federal public sector has been promised by the Commonwealth Government since 2007.

In March 2010, the Government accepted the unanimous report of the House of Representatives Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee for a comprehensive *Public Interest Disclosure Act*, supported by prior research led by Griffith University.

In September 2010, the Government entered agreements with Mr Wilkie and other federal Independents to have new laws in place by July last year.

The Queensland and NSW Parliaments reformed their existing whistleblower protection laws in 2010. The ACT Government is also expected to soon finalise its own draft replacement *Public Interest Disclosure Bill*.

For the World Online Whistleblowing Survey:

<https://whistleblowingsurvey.org>

For a summary of the Australian Newpoll results and further project information:

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/whistleblowing>

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