

This year has been a challenging one for ABC Friends National because there has been an ongoing need to maintain a strong public awareness campaign to counter the undermining of the ABC's independence and sustainability.

The year started with Australian Federal Police raids on the ABC Sydney headquarters, allegedly citing a national security breach in *Four Corners'* reporting of Australian troops being responsible for war crimes in Afghanistan. In responding to this unprecedented attempt to control the independent national broadcaster, no ministerial correspondence was either acknowledged or answered. However, ABC Friends received a great volume of correspondence from concerned members outraged at this direct attack on the freedom of the press in Australia and the public's right to know. As a result, we initiated the *ABC Friends Freedom of the Press Parliamentary Lecture* which was held in Parliament House Theatre in July 2019. Andrew Wilkie, Rebekkah Sharkie and Mike Freeland represented the Parliamentary Friends of the ABC at our event which was very well attended thanks to support from ABC Friends ACT. A surprise member of the audience was ABC Managing Director David Anderson, in Parliament for a committee hearing. Ultimately charges against ABC staff were not pursued, but nevertheless, this was an alarming precedent that undermines public interest journalism and places unnecessary pressure on reporters doing their job.

The extreme summer bushfire season put additional strain on ABC staff in so many affected regional areas as they worked overtime to maintain essential information and advice to local communities. In January ABC Friends initiated a survey to gather information about their priorities ... and we received hundreds of responses which we summarised to present in an interim submission to the Minister for Communications and his Department. An acknowledgement was received, but ABC Friends has not had any feedback about the detail and recommendations made on the basis of community experience. However, we were pleased that in February the Senate passed two motions unanimously recognising the ABC for its vital communications role.

Subsequently, the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* was established and South Australian President, Sue Pinnock, prepared a detailed submission based on our interim report and other expert advice. The final *Royal Commission* report has just been released and it would appear recommendations include ongoing action for ABC Friends to monitor recognition of the ABC as an essential service which requires additional support in regard to the maintenance and extension of transmission infrastructure.

In December Vice President Ed Davis and I spent two days lobbying in Parliament House, meeting a number of members and senators and distributing an updated brief detailing our concerns about ABC funding, political interference and media freedom. We met with the Minister for Communications, Paul Fletcher, inviting him to give the second *ABC Friends Media Freedom Lecture* which has been delayed until 2021.

Since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the National Committee has relied on regular updating of our website and social media to communicate with our members and supporters. Weekly postings have highlighted key issues affecting the ABC, as well as sharing information prepared by like-minded organisations and individuals. Webinars and zoom meetings have greatly assisted the reliable flow of analysis and data, and has enhanced the capacity of our network to be well informed in its advocacy to parliamentarians. The National Committee has sent correspondence to the Prime Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Communications and Board Chair Ita Buttrose identifying specific concerns about funding cutbacks and political interference in the independent national broadcaster. We have also raised concerns with the ABC Managing Director about the implications of the Five-Year Plan on programming and services. In September, the National Committee publicised ABC Board vacancies and encouraged interested people to nominate for these positions which are so important in maintaining the viability of Australian public broadcasting.

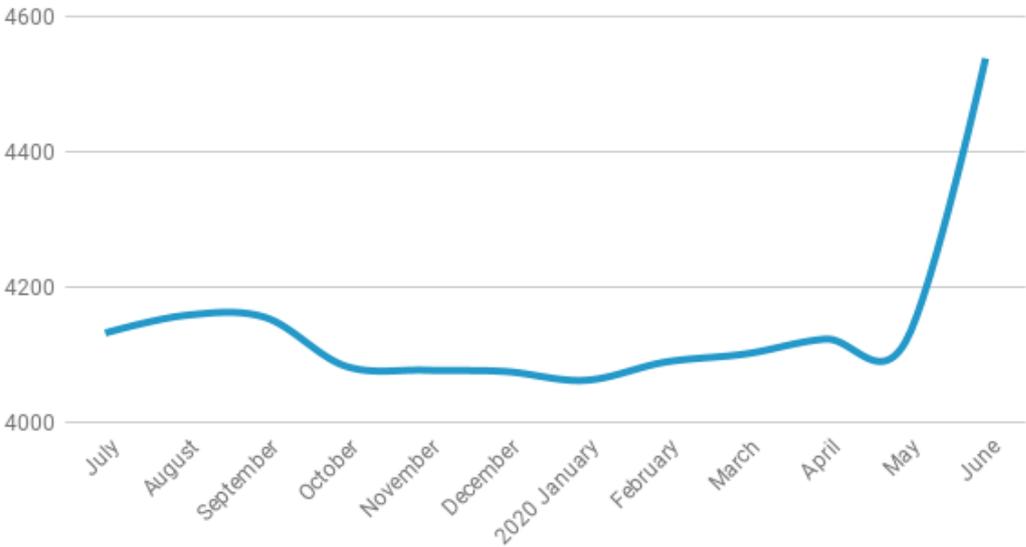
All states have been creative in finding ways to communicate, despite the restrictions of COVID-19. ABC Friends ACT ran an impressive campaign identifying the ABC as a key issue in the Eden Monaro by-election, and we welcome Kirsty Mc Bain as the most recent Member of the House of Representatives to join the Parliamentary Friends of the ABC. The North Sydney Branch of ABC Friends deserves special mention for its

ongoing efforts in lobbying their local member and minister, Paul Fletcher, as they have challenged his rhetoric “No cuts to the ABC”. Their patience and persistence extended to taking a delegation to Canberra for the October Budget.

Despite the limitations on National Committee activities this year, we have maintained a strong presence on social media, and we have been able to engage our members and supporters in personal phoning and letter writing campaigns. Our database has grown considerably because membership and supporter numbers have dramatically increased. There is also a greater awareness about the need to defend Australia’s public broadcaster, as indicated by both donations and direct contact with us.

NB: Notes from Phil Evans, NationBuilder Administrator, follow each graph

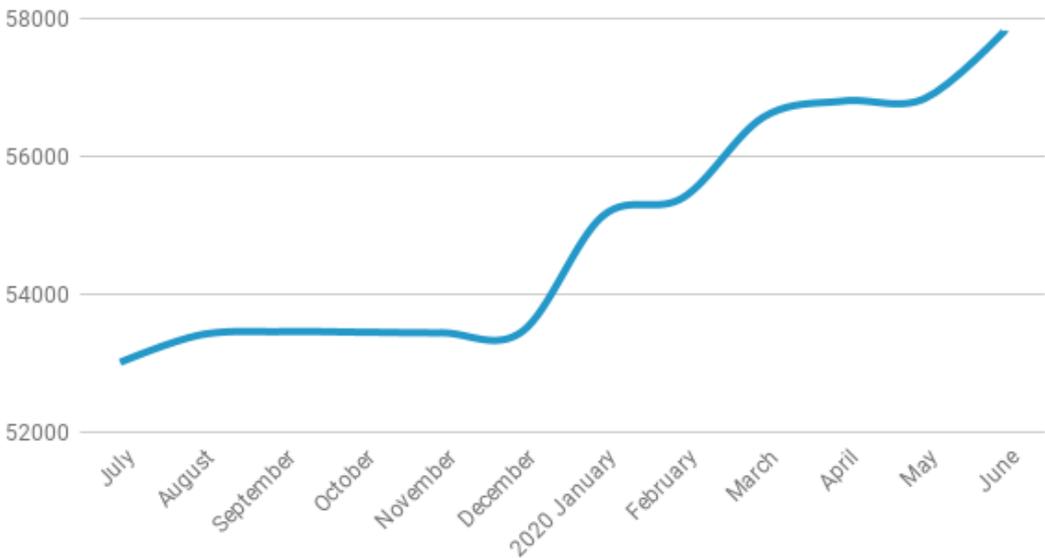
Total National Membership (excl. VIC)



Total Membership

Membership was steady throughout the year, then jumped 10% on the back of a successful membership drive late in the financial year.

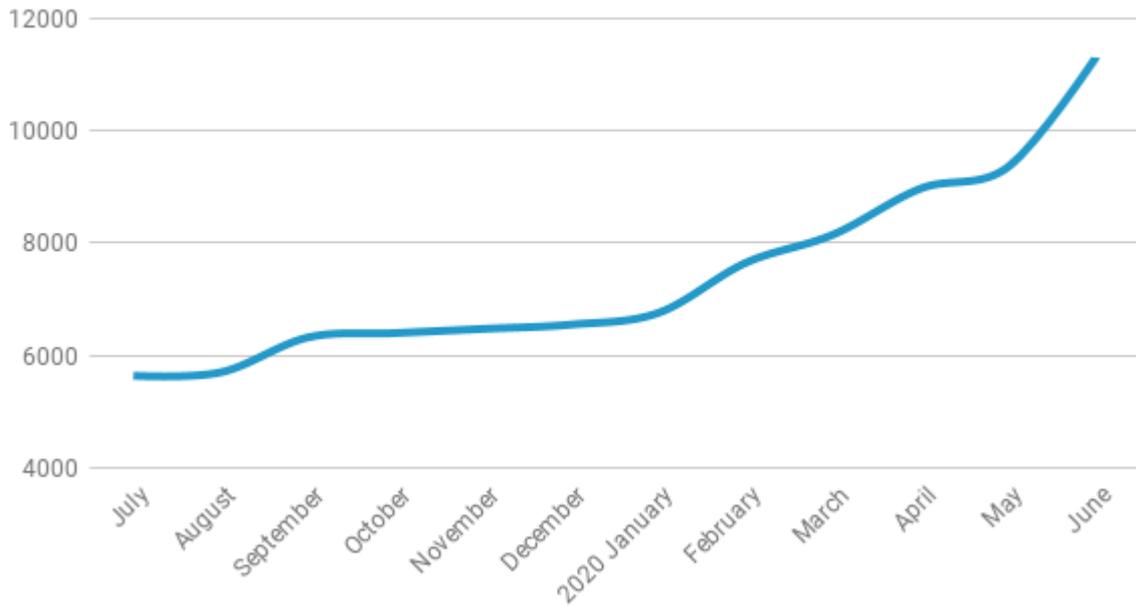
Facebook Likes



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Facebook ‘Like’ numbers had been steady for a few years, but from December 2019 we started to hone a visual style that is resonating well with our audience who are sharing content and attracting new likes.

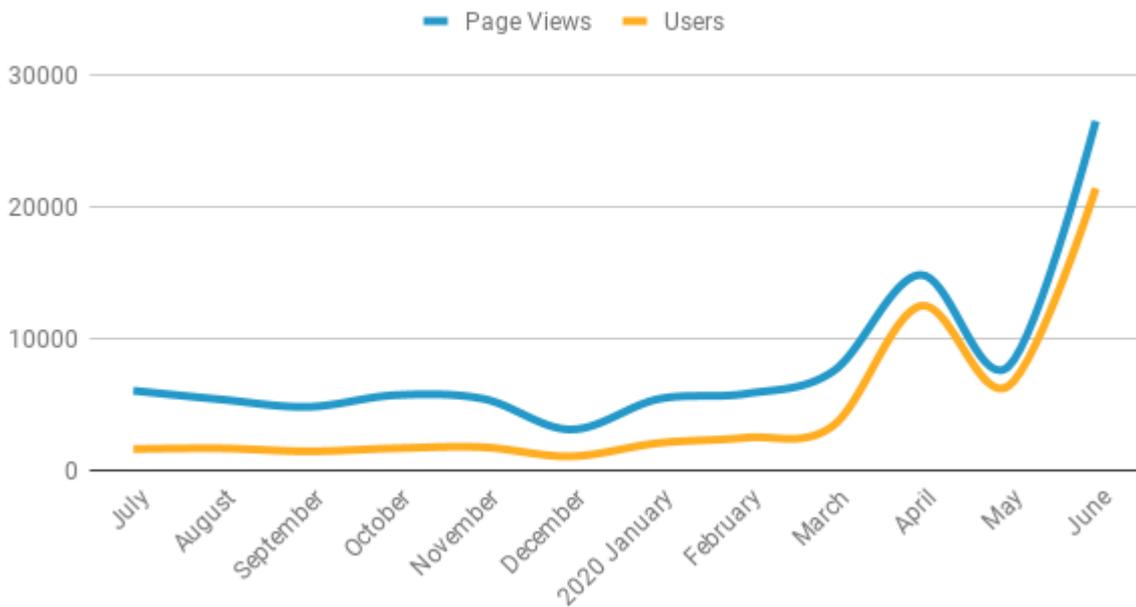
Total Database



Total Database

The database doubled in size this financial year. Much of the growth was due to the petitions and digital actions that we launched using the new NationBuilder system.

Website Traffic



Website Traffic

The website traffic increases also coincide with the launch of petitions and other digital actions early in 2020 which have brought our social media supporters to our website and into our database.

I would like to thank Bobbie Mackley and Kate Durkin for outstanding dedication to their detailed roles in maintaining our governance and financial records to a high standard. This work is often complex and tedious because of the demands of running a national organisation that fully meets governance and financial accountability. National Committee is fortunate to have committed members and volunteers who work to ensure we have effective Finance and IT policies as well as new and attractive merchandise for sale on our website. We are also indebted to Mal Hewitt and his team for their work in the production of *Update*, which is an excellent regular publication so valued by our members and supporters. Special thanks to Bill Condon for his initiative in organising a review by Jenny Potts of the first year's operation of NationBuilder, and to Marcus May who is developing a fresh approach to monitoring how parliamentarians act to support the ABC.

Thanks to retiring National Committee members Ed Davis, Ross McDowell, Kent Eising and Peter Monie for their commitment to the ABC and their role in establishing the national committee.

My special thanks to our Social Media Administrator Phil Evans who is especially creative and supportive in this key role which has been so instrumental in our success and expansion this year. We also greatly appreciate the work of Jacquie Deacon in selecting articles to be regularly circulated through the Reading List.

I look forward to working with the National Committee, including newly elected members Cassandra Parkinson, Vikki Uhlmann and Dr. Mark Hayes as we develop our vital strategic plan for 2021 in the lead up to the next Federal Election. You are all very much appreciated!

Margaret Reynolds
National President