

## Friends of the ABC Join in Protest at ABC Headquarters

Penelope Toltz



Friends of the ABC were present in strength at the protest meeting at 700 Harris Street, Ultimo 6th December in strength. Members came from all over Sydney and from the Blue Mountains and the Southern Highlands. Many had heard about the protest at the Christmas party the previous Friday and others on the FABClister on the internet. Members in their early 20's and up to their mid 80's all joined in chanting and waving banners as members of the ABC Board entered the building to attend the final meeting of the year



Union organisers, joined ABC staff and showed their anger and deep distress at the changes being made to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. At the media conference held during the Board lunch break, Chairman Donald McDonald and Managing Director Jonathan Shier, said that they had requested 34 million dollars for specific projects for 2001 -- including education and business programs to teach Australians about investment. None of the staff queries or worries about co-productions or future staff independence, were addressed by either Mr Shier or Mr McDonald.



One of the biggest complaints that Senator Alston has had over the last four years is that the ABC has not run enough business programs, so we can tick that one off. He has previously complained loud and long about the bloated management structure. Not a word has been heard from him since Mr Shier appointed new managers at highly inflated salaries in comparison to the people they have replaced. With an approximate sum of \$6 million in redundancies, ABC Friends wonder how much money will be left to make programs.



## FoABC NSW - President's Report

Penelope Toltz

Proposed Disneyfication of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation must NOT be allowed to happen. Unfortunately, the cutting of funds has produced a "funding at any price" mentality which, once implemented will never be removed. I know that there are some Friends of the ABC who object even to the ABC shops. I am not one of these people, believing that, for the ABC to sell products linked to its programs is perfectly legitimate.

However, if we wish to talk the marketing talk while walking the marketing walk, the ABC brand is SACRED. This is not to put too fine a point on it. ABC stands for integrity, excellent research, well made and well executed programming. It is a brand second to none for engendering a feeling of trust with all of us, its public. In a recent poll taken, the ABC was seen as an organisation representing integrity, right up there with the charities.

If the ABC is to become some giant Disney-style organisation, then this is the end of its veracity. It has a good name largely because it is not seen as a commercial product maker, but as a servant of us, the Australian listeners and viewers who own it.

I am aware that Mr Shier has a formidable task before him. But I believe that the old adage "we had to destroy the village in order to save it" which came out of the Vietnam War is simply rubbish. If the ABC no longer stands for independence, quality information free from commercial imperatives, then what do we have? Why another commercial network, that's what.

I am aware that desperate times call for desperate measures, but these are NOT desperate times. Our Federal Government is talking about a \$4 billion plus surplus! There is plenty of money available to fund the ABC to the levels it was funded in 1994/5 or even back to 1992.

In regional and rural Australia, members of the public are being told that their services will not be affected. They already are affected. If the ABC had received the money it requested for digitisation -- \$194million -- its aim was to have each of its regional radio stations able to function as a television station. So that is all gone. Also there has been no money allocated for content for the two digital channels it is allowed to run.

An education and a children's channel has been designated. But no money for content, means that our children will have to watch product from overseas!

On Wednesday 22nd November I attended a public meeting in Bathurst to discuss the forming of a local branch. Thirty chairs had been put out in the hall for visitors. However more than 100 people turned up to hear Peter Andren (local independent federal member) and me talk about the ABC and its perilous state.

There was a decision to form a local branch. On 29th November, there was a meeting in Orange to set up a branch in that area, also. Some people have come forward interested in starting up a branch again in Newcastle and also in Coffs Harbour.

Feel free to contact me by mail or email, if you wish to be involved in local branches in any of the above mentioned areas. There has also been interest from Byron Bay, Lismore and Gunnedah and Wagga. So, email me, write to me and we will help you start up.

## The responsibility of the ABC Board

Tony Maniaty\*

Mr Shier has been much battered in the press. The normally restrained Errol Simper (The Australian, 27/10/2000 described his address to the staff on 26 October as 'incoherent, embarrassing and without substance.'

'You could easily say a lot more about yesterday and not much of it would have been flattering to Shier. Yet it wouldn't be right or fair. Shier didn't appoint himself. His Board knew perfectly well when he was interviewed that he had no public broadcasting or program-making experience. He'd been a commercial air-time salesman. He may be well-meaning. But he was so silly at times yesterday, you felt sorry for him.

'The truth is that Jonathan Shier doesn't deserve ridicule. The poor bloke knows zero about public broadcasting and in all probability should never have been appointed.'

Chairman Donald McDonald told the ABC's Media Watch on November 6: 'It concerns me that there's not a . mature and less partisan debate going on.'

But that is exactly what the public and FABC want and neither Mr McDonald or Mr Shier are informing the community to allow this to occur.



The Board is the guardian of the ABC. Mr Shier was formally appointed by the Board and the Board is responsible for signing off on his restructure and his internal budget.

Kirsten Garrett, who recently stepped down as staff-elected director, writes about the role of the Board and the disadvantages it labours under.

'The Board members have an honourable role laid out for them by the Australian people, through Parliament, to protect the independence and integrity of the ABC. They are paid handsomely to do that job, some tens of thousands of dollars each, and for most of them it's only a couple of a days a month. In return, each director's job is to shield the public broadcaster from political and commercial interference. Not to make profits, not to pull in bums for advertisers and not to be the political or ideological hack for anyone.'

'If media rumours are correct, there is to be a \$10 million cut to news and current affairs, and some more millions out of radio. Other issues will be the cost of the complex - indeed, as yet, puzzling - management structure; the pressure to try to make money out of ABC Online, which will inevitably skew content making; and the explosive issue of how decisions about news and current affairs content are made.

'This last matter is a vital but poorly understood one for directors, who may be fine people in their own field, but have no real media background and who come out of commercial structures where it is self-evident that the boss decides. The boss is a proprietor, or the advertisers, or the marketing department. That is not how public broadcasting content is decided.

'The Board will also be working on how to market whatever decisions they do make so that they don't look as if they are carrying out the Government's agenda. Haunting everyone is the cabinet-in-confidence document leaked just after Donald McDonald's appointment. Let me quote a few phrases from Senator Richard Alston: "I have previously indicated my support for an approach where resources are targeted to fit a redefined role for the ABC and also a wish for the ability to influence future ABC functions and activities more directly.'



Political stacking of the Board has been a problem since the ABC began in 1932, not only because of the suspicion of political bias but because it tends to exclude people- with experience and knowledge in the media:

'... directors who - for all their brains - have never worked a single day in the electronic media. Broadcasting experience, who needs it? Given this, the board can neither tackle government on important broadcasting issues with any authority, nor contest those issues with management and staff with professional assurance. An us-and-them mentality results, stifling ABC relations from top to bottom'

\*Tony Manity is an ex-ABC producer. This item was published in the Australian on 25Nov2000

## Raise the barricades for Radio National Robert Manne\*

On New Year's Day, through the collaborative work of almost its entire crew, Radio National was responsible for one of the most brilliant pieces of broadcasting in the history of the Australian media: a scintillating, cultural survey of the past millennium, extending over the course of the entire day.

I saw clearly on that day something I had only dimly glimpsed before - namely the astonishingly significant place Radio National has come to assume in the cultural life of Australia in the world of books, ideas, science and the arts.

Last week the Minister for Communications, Senator Richard Alston, offered the ABC some gratuitous advice about the need to eliminate esoterica from its programming. If it was the offering of Radio National he had in mind his advice was both foolish and philistine. At its current level of daily performance, Radio National is one of the truly great achievements in the history of the ABC.

There are not many Australian causes for which I would go to the barricades. The retention of Radio Australia is one of them.

I do not want for a moment to suggest that the ABC is only, or even mainly, valuable because of the role it plays in high culture. The ABC is as much about community news and local councils, veterinary and gardening advice, the level of rivers and bushfire warnings, as it is about politics and ideas. In very many areas it enriches the popular culture.

In its broad humanising impact, across very many fields of high and popular culture, we owe far more to the ABC than we commonly understand.

The longer I have lived the more I have learnt to care for the ABC and to fear what right-wing ideologues and penny-pinching governments might, between them, soon allow us to lose.

\*Robert Manne is associate professor of politics at La Trobe University. On occasions he has earned a pittance for his commentary on the ABC.

## Radio National - better than sex Darce Cassidy

The ABC's enemies, most recently Senator Alston, continue to peddle the myth that only a minority use the ABC, when the fact is that 86% of Australians use an ABC service each week. ANOP 1990.

They, the enemies, delight in picking on the ABC's ideas network, Radio National, for its allegedly small audience.

Size is comparative. Radio National does have a lot fewer listeners than Triple J, but it is not the least listened to of the ABC's radio networks. That distinction belongs to the ABC's Parliamentary and News Network. If audience size is to be the sole determinant of worth, then perhaps we should take the micro-phone away from Senator Alston and all the other key presenters on the parliamentary network.

A few other comparisons. Radio National is a specialist network. Its style and content is closer to The Bulletin or Quadrant, or in newspaper terms The Australian or the Australian Financial Review.

Each week 646,000 people listen to RN in the eight capital cities of Australia. The figure is larger for the whole of Australia. By comparison the daily edition of the Financial Review sells only 95,000 copies, while The Bulletin sells 76,000 copies and The Australian sells 131,000 copies daily

Penthouse sells 77,000 copies each month. Assuming its readers are all men, and assuming that half of the more than 646,000 listeners to RN are men, we can calculate that more than 4 times as many Australian men listen to RN than buy Penthouse. Does this mean that Radio National is four times better than sex?

## Radio National supremo from Radio 2UE

The ABC has appointed a former presenter and executive from 2UE - the radio station that is home to John Laws and Alan Jones - as head of Radio National and News Radio, the 24-hour news and parliamentary network. Mr Mark Collier takes up the newly created position of head of national talk radio, responsible for both networks.

‘Collier has a strong background in the commercial media, with 2UE, the Seven network, Murdoch Magazines and Australis Media, but he has not worked in public broadcasting. Sue Howard, Director of ABC Radio, said Collier had “a track record in developing innovative programming.’

Sue Javes

Daily Telegraph, 16Nov2000

‘About 10 years ago, talking about 2UE, Collier said that it was not easy to manage people who were ‘as intellectual and individualistic’ as Alan Jones and John Laws. That will make them laugh over at RN.’

Deborah Cameron SMH 9Dec2000

The position of head of Radio National was abolished; no explanation, no justification. There was no place in the ABC for Stephen Alward who had held that position. A letter of support signed by most of RN's staff was not enough to save him.

A name change was announced: Radio National will now be known as Radio One. Explanation: none.

No sign of Radios 2,3,4, 5 or 6 as yet. Perhaps it is hoped the acclaim for RN, particularly in the Mansfield Review, will not carry over when the station is differently branded.

Senator Alston: ‘the ABC should go for ratings if it expects more money from the government.’

## Australian Story - What the cuts mean

Not mentioned in cuts to programs is the award-winning Australian Story, which comes under the aegis of current affairs. It is believed that a 10% cut has to be worn by Australian Story as their share of the cuts to current affairs.

Program budgets can be cut by reducing output (the number of programs) or dropping quality (research time, filming time, editing time, scripting time). In other words, it's a contest between quantity and quality.

If the number of programs is cut, the cuts are obvious to the viewers. And replacement programs must be found for the time slot. Loss in quality is less obvious to the viewers, at first. This is believed to be the option for next year's Australian Story.



Australian Story has won four UN peace prizes in three years. These are awarded for programs which bring cohesion to the community and are positive in the areas of peace. (This year's winner was a program on Jason Li, *The Mild Colonial Boy*, produced by John Millard, edited by Wendy Twibill and researched by Mara Blazic. And this year, interestingly enough, there was no nomination, let alone winner, from commercial radio or TV.)

Australian Story is a series which brilliantly measures up to Charter requirements, which are:

'to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard; to broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community.

It is the only fully funded weekly documentary series on ABC TV; that is, it does not depend on any external source of funding as many ABC programs do.

Australian Story is made for its distinctively Australian audience. Its style, honesty and sensitivity to its subjects depend on time to talk to the subject of each story and win their trust. Cutting its budget means a dropping of standards. Something we will have to get used to on the ABC if adequate government funding is not restored.

## Lies, damned lies and ratings

Darce Cassidy

Enemies of the ABC attack it for poor ratings. They claim it is only for minorities, or, worse still, for 'elites'.

For some supporters of the ABC 'ratings' is a dirty word, relevant only to the grubby world of commercial broadcasting and associated with dumbing down.

They are both wrong.

Each week 86% of Australians use an ABC service. That's a whopping great majority, not a minority, and it has nothing to do with elites.

But ratings are important to the ABC. In fact the ABC Charter explicitly requires the ABC to take account of ratings, stipulating that the ABC 'provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs'.

This requirement to both have our cake and eat it has been easier for radio than for television. In radio the ABC has three popular networks that each draw a share comparable to their commercial rivals. For example the ABC's local Melbourne station, formerly 3LO, usually gets a little over 10% of the audience.

Triple J, Regional Radio and Metropolitan Radio cater to a broad range of listeners. On the other hand News Radio, Radio National and Classic FM are the specialist networks. They have a smaller audience share, for example Radio National getting about 1.5% of the Melbourne audience.

In television, with only one channel available, it has been more difficult to be all things to all people. Nevertheless the ABC has generally managed to keep the balance in television as well.

Audience growth does not have to mean dumbing down. For example between 1988 and 1993 ABC radio listening increased by a spectacular 50%. At the same time the educational level and the socio-economic status of the listeners rose, rather than fell, across all radio networks.

The ratings debate is often distorted by misinformation. There are two principal quantitative measurements of audiences. 'Share' refers to the average percentage of the total radio listening audience tuned to the station. 'Reach' usually refers to the average number of people who watch or listen to the station each week. Commercial stations tend to have a relatively high share but a comparatively low reach, while the reverse tends to be the case for the ABC.

Thus if 'reach' is our measure the ABC scores well (86% watch and/or listen each week) while if 'share' is the measure then ABC Radio gets just over 20% in the cities and just under 30% in the country. TV share is lower. Thus the ABC's enemies usually choose to quote the 'share' ratings and ignore the 'reach' ratings.

'Share' and 'reach' are only quantitative measures that simply tell us that the TV or radio was tuned to a particular station at a particular time. These measures tell us nothing about how the audience reacted to a program. Qualitative measures are another story again.

The need to be both popular and specialist is not just a charter obligation. It is vital for the ABC's survival. If the ABC only appealed to a minority - if say 60% of Australians never used it - the ABC would be vulnerable. On the other hand if it lost its distinctiveness, if it became commercial broadcasting without commercials, it would be equally vulnerable.