

AUNTY GETS IT WRONG AGAIN - BADLY

A word from the NSW President - Mal Hewitt



There are times when the countless advocates for and supporters of the ABC across the country are forced to shake their heads in bewilderment at the decisions of ABC

Management regarding popular programs of outstanding quality.

- It happened when "Earthbeat," the specialist weekly environment program, was scrapped at the precise time that the rest of the world suddenly awoke to the realization that our very future could depend on our understanding of the cause and effect of human activity and global warming, issues so effectively covered in "Earthbeat."

- It happened when "Australia Talks Back," essential listening at 6.05 pm each weekday for anybody interested in probing, intelligent discussion of national issues, was replaced by the exceedingly bland "Australia Talks," and the brilliant broadcaster Sandy McCutcheon was replaced by a presenter for whom the English language seems to be a challenge, let alone the subtleties of many topics covered.

- It happened at Classic FM when "For the God Who Sings," essential listening for all involved in presenting church music, was

moved from its early Sunday morning timeslot, convenient for conductors and choristers before they headed off to services, to very late on Sunday night, long after they have all gone to bed!

- It has happened again with the axing of "The Religion Report," essential listening for both the faithful and the faithless at a time when, right across the world, leaders of nations justify their decisions on religious grounds and claim to be acting at the prompting of their particular God. A time, it would seem, when a specialist program like "The Religion Report" would be enhanced, not eliminated.

WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON AT RADIO NATIONAL?

The firestorm that has descended on the ABC and consequent disastrous press, the ripples of which have reached as far as Federal Parliament, was utterly predictable when one considers the Radio National audience.

It is intelligent, it is educated and it is articulate, and it is highly unlikely to take kindly to being told by ABC management what it wants on its network. Radio National listeners were encouraged to respond to a recent survey, but the survey dealt only with method of delivery of programs, not the far more important issue of program content, and it is the very real

fear of the "dumbing down" of RN that has its supporters so concerned. After all, we have all watched in dismay as some ABC Local Radio has been reduced to the intellectual level of commercial radio without the ads!

Unquestionably, the decision to so radically change the RN lineup has been very badly handled by ABC management, and the bland and reassuring general statements which have been issued since Stephen Crittenden aired the matter on his program have done little to allay fears of the loyal RN audience. From Radio National Manager Jane Connors: "2008 has been a strong year for ABC Radio National and with the planned changes, 2009 offers growth in depth and breadth of its content available, delivered in ways audiences enjoy." Tell us how, Jane, with the replacement of nine programs with one new one!

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Who to write...

Anyone seeking basic information about writing to persons of influence might find it helpful to go to the FABC NSW website www.fabc.org.au where there are some menu items under "Be Active" leading to pages of information: *Who can I write to? What can I say?*

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In the following piece, of which Sir Humphrey would have been proud: "A major development for the network will be the introduction of a new radio features program and an increase in online features content. These program changes allow RN to convert a small number of positions into roles with a stronger online and digital editorial focus and to enable general enhancements to the network's website." Somebody was paid to write that??

SOME ANSWERS PLEASE, Mr. SCOTT

A publicly funded broadcaster is ultimately answerable to its audience, who provide its funds, and the seeming arrogance underlying the decisions at Radio National does not sit well with that audience.

Can you please tell us, Mark Scott:

- Upon which audience surveys regarding RN content were the decisions based?
- What was the involvement of ABC staff and presenters in the decision making process?
- Why are you proposing the making of specialist programs for podcasting only, when the cost of broadcasting those programs is minimal?
- If the changes are a reaction to the growth of your online audience, are not the programs being downloaded the very programs you're getting rid of?
- Are you not aware that, whether over or under the age of 50, the audience for Radio National, both on line and on air, is actually looking for programs of depth and intellectual rigour, in fact the very specialist programs you seem to want to get rid of?

Elsewhere in Update we provide extensive coverage of reaction to the decisions regarding Radio National, a reflection of the strength of feeling that the decisions have aroused.

WHAT MESSAGE CAN WE GLEAN FROM ABC FUNDING PRIORITIES?

It is no secret that the Radio National specialist units operate on minimal budgets. The Religion Report gave us insights, information, opinion and debate, every week throughout the year on a budget of around \$200,000 to cover salaries, technical production, research and travel. ABC management has just committed several million dollars, although not the six million widely publicized, to one more year of The Chaser's limited number of shows, presumably in a bidding war with the commercial networks, suggesting perhaps an unhealthy obsession with ratings? And as a co-production, the ABC does not even own the show! We can only imagine the effect on morale of those in the ABC who continue to produce programs of

outstanding quality despite constantly diminishing resources with which to work.

Friends of the ABC will be arguing strenuously that the government should provide the ABC with substantially more funds in 2009 in order that the ABC may fulfil its charter in every respect, but we would like to have confidence that ABC Management will display responsible stewardship in handling any funding increase.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Rudd Government has invited submissions from the public into its inquiry into the future of the ABC and SBS. In this Update, Darce Cassidy has provided a detailed guide to the writing of a submission – I urge all ABC supporters to take the opportunity to tell the government what you think (it must be done by December 12th), and why the ABC must receive a substantial increase in funding in the 2009 budget if it is to meet the minimum requirements of its charter.

RUPERT MURDOCH AS BOYER LECTURER

It is somewhat bizarre that the ABC Board considers Rupert Murdoch a suitable person to be lecturing Australians on anything! He who abandoned his Australian citizenship in order to make a buck in the US, whose appalling Fox network has provided such an enthusiastic cheersquad for the totally discredited Bush regime and its disastrous adventure in Iraq, and whose minions writing in his Australian publications dare accuse the ABC of bias, and argue vehemently for its demise. But I suppose when some of those critics are actually members of the ABC Board, it's not so surprising that they would give their boss the kind of platform that the Boyer Lectures provide. It only serves to strengthen the argument for a new process of appointing the ABC Board, and we applaud the Rudd Government's moves in that direction.

PLAY SCHOOL RECOGNIZED

I am delighted to announce that the Friends of the ABC 2008 Award for Excellence in Broadcasting will be presented to Play School, one of those unique ABC jewels which has been leading the way in quality television broadcasting for young children since 1966.

You can read more about this award and Play School elsewhere in Update, but the award will be presented at the Friends of the ABC Christmas Party, to be held at the Ultimo ABC headquarters on Friday 5th December at 6 pm, and all Friends are warmly invited.

Mal Hewitt
President, NSW Friends of the ABC





Plaudits for Play School

Mal Hewitt

The NSW Friends of the ABC Award for Broadcasting Excellence in 2008 will be presented to Play School in recognition of the program's astonishing record of continuous presentation of Children's Television of outstanding quality since 1966.

It was a unanimous decision of the NSW FABC Executive that Play School should be recognized in this year's award, but, as father of just-turned-three Reginald, I must confess to a special interest, as nothing can encroach on the sacrosanct 9.30 to 10am timeslot on ABC Kids in our house. Justine, Georgie, Jay, Rhys, Karen, Leah, Alex, Teo, Brooke, Sofya, Matt and Andrew have become members of our extended family. After a lifetime working with secondary and occasionally primary kids, my interest in early childhood education has become very focussed!

There are few television programs anywhere in the world which could match Play School for longevity – 42 years is a rather long run for any production, and the rollcall of Australian actors who have appeared on the show is also extraordinary. It includes Lorraine Bayly, Colin Buchanan, Simon Burke, Benita Collings, Trisha Goddard, John Hamblin, Noni Hazlehurst, Deborah Mailman, Philip Quast, Alister Smart, Don Spencer, Monica Trapaga and John Waters. One wonders what was wrong with Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman,

that they couldn't get a Play School gig!

Executive Producer Virginia Lumsden (33 years with the ABC and 10 years with Playschool) received the news of the Award with obvious delight, and quickly responded with an invitation for Reg and his dad to visit the Play School Studio at Ultimo for the recording of an episode where we met Virginia and her small production unit – Director Julie Money, Production Designer Fiona Donovan and, on this particular day, presenters Georgie and Matt.

We learned that in this studio, 9 series of Play School (with 5 shows in a series, and each series on a particular theme) are produced each year. 10 shows are broadcast each week, one morning and one afternoon, with a mixture of the new and the recycled, and that shows are kept in the cycle for 7 years. Play School also provides employment for 4 or 5 different writers, and an Early Childhood adviser is an integral part of the team, joining them for all stages of production from inception to script meetings to rehearsal to studio recording.

I commented to Virginia that entertainment and learning for older children has become increasingly dominated by whiz-bang digital imagery and technology, in marked contrast to the early childhood reliance on quality singing, dancing, movement, storytelling and activity that we see on Play School that is timeless, and just plain

good teaching. This led to a discussion of the principles underlying television programming for young children that underpin each episode of Play School:

- be entertaining
- involve genuine interaction/connection with audience
- don't condescend or patronize (kids see through fakes)
- recognize the difference between childlike and childish
- be aware that we are teaching values – co-operation, sharing, kindness, that life isn't always about winning

Play School has been doing what it does with distinction for 42 years – the 50 year old viewers of 1966 are now approaching 50 – and its impact on the lives and values of countless young Australians has been indelible. Reg and I left the Ultimo studios last week with a lasting impression of ABC program makers with a passion for their craft, with a knowledge of and respect for those who have preceded them, with a dedication and commitment to producing programs of outstanding quality despite the constraints of ever diminishing funds, resources and support.

Our warmest congratulations to Virginia and her team as worthy recipients of the 2008 Award for Broadcasting Excellence. 



Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy

Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Media Release. 16 October 2008

Measures to ensure strong and independent national broadcasters

The Rudd Government today announced a public consultation and new board appointment processes to ensure the future strength and independence of Australia's national broadcasters.

"For the next two months, the Australian public will have its say on how the ABC and SBS are positioned for the next decade," the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator Stephen Conroy said.

"The ABC and the SBS are two of Australia's most important and loved public institutions. They have entertained, educated and informed generations of Australians. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure their future strength and independence."

The Government has released a discussion paper, ABC and SBS: Towards a Digital Future, canvassing some of the key issues facing the two broadcasters during the next decade.

"Australians are passionate about their national broadcasters and I expect there to be some strong views about ensuring the ABC and SBS are well placed to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the emerging digital, online and global media environment," Senator Conroy said.

The Rudd Government will also restore independence to the ABC and SBS Boards. The Government is today calling for applications from Australians to fill four vacancies on the Boards. Applications will be assessed on merit by a Nomination Panel established at arms-length from the Minister.

"For too long the process of appointing directors to the ABC and SBS Boards has been open to political interference. It is time to restore independence," Senator Conroy said.

"The new selection process will ensure that all future appointments to the ABC and SBS Boards are conducted in a manner that fosters independence, transparency, accountability and public confidence."

The Government will also reinstate the position of staff-elected director on the ABC Board.

"The position of staff-elected Director makes an important contribution to the ABC's independence by providing the Board with a unique and important insight into ABC operations," Senator Conroy said.

Discussions on the future of the national broadcasters formed part of the agenda at the Australia 2020 Summit, held in Canberra in April 2008. The Rudd Government now wants to extend that dialogue to the wider Australia community.

The outcomes of the public consultation will be considered by the Government ahead of the next three-year funding round for national broadcasters, which commences in July 2009. The outcomes will also contribute to policy decisions for the long-term future of national broadcasting.

Submissions can be made to the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy before Friday 12 December 2008. The discussion paper is available at www.dbcde.gov.au/abcsbsreview or by calling 1800 025 145.

Further information about the merit-based appointments process is available from the Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy's website at www.dbcde.gov.au/abcsbsboards.

Contact: Tim Marshall 0408 258 457



THE FUTURE OF THE ABC

– Your chance to have your say

Darce Cassidy



The government is inviting public submissions to its inquiry into the future of the ABC and the SBS. Significantly, this inquiry coincides with the government's consideration of the ABC's triennial budget submission. It also comes at a time when digital television and digital radio channels are expanding, and when the ABC is expanding its Internet presence, and further developing the Internet as a means of program delivery.

This is a critical time for the ABC, and an opportunity for all of us to express our views directly to the government.

The government has published a lengthy discussion paper (it runs to 57 pages) which is available at www.abc.gov.au/media_broadcasting/consultation_and_submissions/abc_sbs_review/discussion_paper

However public submissions don't have to be confined to the issues raised in the discussion paper. You can comment on any aspect of the ABC that you wish.

The preferred length of submissions is less than 1,000 words. To be accepted submissions must be accompanied by a cover sheet. Details at www.abc.gov.au/media_broadcasting/consultation_and_submissions/abc_sbs_review/make_a_submission

The discussion paper raises 24 specific questions. However you don't have to confine yourself to those questions – you can make any comment you like.

What follows is a list of what I consider to be the critical issues, and my own views about those questions. I urge you to express your own opinions in your own submission.

1. How should the ABC be a comprehensive broadcaster in a

multi-channel, multi-platform environment?

Response: Public broadcasting must not only be available to everyone (including remote areas) but it should strive to be used by everyone. It is not there simply to make the programs the commercials can't be bothered with. It is there for everyone, not just the elite. As former Director of BBC TV, Sir Huw Wheldon said it should aim "to make the good popular, and the popular good". The proliferation of channels and delivery platforms makes this easier, but there are equity issues with some delivery platforms, especially if there is a charge for access. The ABC would not be a public broadcaster if some people were priced out of access to it.

2. Should the ABC Charter be amended to be more contemporary?

Response. The Charter is meant to be a statement of broad principle, rather than about nuts and bolts. In a rapidly changing environment it is up to the Board to develop appropriate policies. The new board appointment process adopted by the government suggests that we will have a more appropriate board in future. However there is one important change required to the Charter. When the ABC was established the Act forbade the ABC to broadcast advertisements.

3. The Internet did not exist at this time. Technically, transmission over the Internet is not broadcasting. The Act therefore needs to be amended to prohibit the ABC running advertisements on its Internet sites, on material transmitted via the Internet.

4. What role should the ABC have in promoting Australia's cultural identity and presenting Australian images on TV, radio and other media?

Response: The ABC used to have an excellent reputation for the

production of high quality Australian drama on television. In recent years this has declined, largely for budget reasons. The ABC should be funded to produce at least 100 hours of local drama a year.

5. What role should the ABC play in children's programming?

Response: The ABC has plans to start a dedicated TV children's channel, with an emphasis on locally produced material. This will be a costly undertaking, and the ABC needs a substantial increase in funds to achieve this.

6. Should additional funding options for national broadcasting program be considered such as user-pays systems for programs distributed online, or open contracting for public interest content?

Response: The introduction to the government's discussion paper states that public broadcasting should enable "all Australians to access broadcasting services, regardless of geography or capacity to pay, to allow them to participate in society and its institutions." A user pays system for online content, especially given the extraordinary high cost of Internet access in Australia is not consistent with universal access.

The phrase "open contracting" appears to refer to the system by which the contract to run the Australia Network is open for renewal every five years. This fundamentally alters the relationship between this ABC operation and the government. It does not have the same "arms length" relationship with the government, nor is it subject to the ABC Charter or the provisions of the ABC Act which forbid advertising on the ABC proper. The extension of this system to other ABC operations would not be consistent with the independence of the ABC.

7. What is the proper role of Radio National? Is there a problem if it has a small audience?

Radio National is the ABC's ideas network. While it has extended its reach in recent years through podcasts, it has a smaller audience than ABC Local Radio and Triple J. This is not a problem. The ABC as a whole has an obligation to provide something for everyone, but this does not apply to each individual network. To criticise RN for having a relatively small audience is like criticizing the ABC's youth network, Triple J, for the fact that not many people over fifty listen to it. Some politicians like to criticise RN for its low ratings. Perhaps they should be reminded that it is their network, the parliamentary and news network (which broadcasts news when parliament is not sitting) that has the smallest audience. Radio National is an essential part of the ABC's output and its specialist programs need to be retained.

8. Is the ABC adequately funded?

Response. By any reasonable measure the ABC is under funded.

In 2005-6 government funding for the BBC was \$107 per head. In the same year government funding for the ABC was \$41.40 per head.

In 2005-6 figures published by the Australian Communications and Media Authority indicate that the combined income of the three commercial TV channels was \$3738 million. The average income of a commercial channel was therefore \$1246 million compared to the ABC's \$827 million from the government. Moreover this money covered not only ABC TV, but also the ABC's five domestic radio networks and its overseas service Radio Australia. 

1. Media Guardian 7/7/2006, BBC license fee income tops £3bn, guardian.co.uk, viewed 28 July 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/jul/07/bbc.broadcasting1>.

2. ABC Annual Report, 2005-6, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, viewed 28 July 2008, http://www.abc.net.au/corp/annual_reports/ar06/pdf/ABC_Annual_Report_2005-06.pdf.

3. Commercial Television Industry Financial Trends, 1978-79 to 2005-06, Australian Communications and Media Authority, viewed 28 July 2008, http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib310665/commercial_tv_trends.pdf.

Please let the Government know how important the ABC is to you.

Jill Greenwell

The ABC will get adequate funds only if the Government feels the pressure of public opinion. The public has been invited to contribute to the decisions about the next three-year funding round for the ABC and for SBS by taking part in a process of consultation announced on 16 October by the Minister for Communications.

Submissions - which can be in the form of a letter, and don't have to be long - must be in before Friday 12 December 2008.

These are some of the questions which the Government, and the ABC, would like your reaction to:

- In the future media environment, with a bewildering array of choices, do you think there will be any need for the ABC to continue to provide 'comprehensive broadcasting services' which appeal to a wide range of tastes and interests?
- What sort of role do you think the ABC should have in presenting Australian stories both to its Australian and to its overseas audiences?
- The ABC is currently charged with presenting programs which reflect Australia's cultural diversity. If you think the ABC should maintain this role, what could it be doing more of, or doing better?
- Do you think the ABC plays a valuable role in children's programs? Should ABC children's television programs be on a separate, dedicated, channel or on the main ABC channel - or on both?
- Should there be a role for the public broadcasters in education and training in a 2020 media and communications environment?
- Should consideration be given to expanding the ABC's overseas service, and if so, in what form and to which countries?
- What mix between outsourced and in-house production should there be?
- Should a user-pays system for online programs be considered?
- Would you support open contracting for broadcasting services, similar to the current contracting of Australia Network (formerly Asia-Pacific TV)?

Submissions must have a cover sheet and should be posted to:

ABC SBS Review

Department of Broadband, Communications
and the Digital Economy

GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Alternatively, submissions can be emailed, as an attachment, to:
abcsbsreview@dbcde.gov.au

What are they doing to Radio National? God help us!

Paul Collins

Wednesday, 15 October 2008



An extraordinary opening comment by Radio National Religion Report presenter Stephen Crittenden this morning was the first many ABC listeners will

have heard about serious changes to the RN schedule planned for 2009. Former ABC religious broadcaster Paul Collins takes up the tale:

Words tell you everything. When you hear "interdisciplinary" you know it means "dumbing down" and "consumer focused" always refers to the lowest common denominator. This is precisely the rhetoric used yesterday by ABC Radio National management to describe their intentions for RN programming next year.

Several specialist programs are being taken off-air including the Religion Report, the Media Report and Radio Eye. The Reports are flagship programs that deal with issues central to current culture. Apparently they are being replaced by a movie show

and something about the future. Specialist broadcasters will spend more time responding to opinionated bloggers rather than making programs. God help us!

Let's be clear what ABC Radio management is up to: it is a case of the bland leading the bland. Specialisation is out. Nowadays the belief is that any old (or, more likely, young) "interdisciplinary" journalist can deal with any topic. Well, I've been interviewed literally hundreds of times on ABC radio and TV. My experience is that while most journalists make a reasonable go of it, they just don't know the detail and often have to be led to the key questions.

Take religion for example. There are no more than half a dozen specialist religious journalists in Australia. Two work for Fairfax (Linda Morris and Barney Zwartz) and the rest for the ABC which has had a religion department since the beginning of the Corporation. Stephen Crittenden, John Cleary and Rachael Kohn are able to cover a complex spectrum of beliefs, practices and theologies from

a wide cross-section of traditions precisely because they are specialists.

Nowadays religion is a mainstream political, cultural and socio-economic issue with enormous impact on world affairs. To cover it adequately you need specialists. That is precisely what Stephen Crittenden has done on the Religion Report. He knows what the issues are and where the bodies are buried. Sure, he's upset some powerful people, but that's the nature of a free media.

I'm not paranoid. I don't see this as an attack on religion. It's more a lack of appreciation of specialization, derived from the half-witted, post-modern conviction that everyone can do anything. Sure, they can ask a few prosaic, "man-in-the-street" questions. But that's not the task of Radio National. If you think it is, get a job with the commercials.

We need to be clear where this is leading. It effectively spells the end of religion as a specialization in the ABC. If you only have a couple of minor, essentially life-style programs on air you don't need people who know their stuff. All you need is an 'interdisciplinary, consumer-focused' approach, produced by the type of journalist who doesn't know the difference between an Anglo-Catholic and an Evangelical!

Paul Collins is a former specialist editor (religion) for the ABC. 

The dumbing down of Radio National



Crikey.com

Thursday, 16 October 2008

By Andrew Dodd

Just three days ago I was telling a family member how proud I was of the role The Media Report has played in Australia's media debate. It's been there through the advent of the internet, cable TV, multi-channelling and myspace. It was on-air as the Howard Government gutted the cross media laws, as all the TV networks changed hands and as new

publications emerged and others died.

The Media Report has popped up in Hansard, the indexes of books, the curricula of university courses and the ipods of listeners. It has kept on keeping on for fifteen years with informed intelligent debate about the state of the nation's media.

Not bad for a half hour show that's staffed by one and a half people and costs much less to produce over a year than just one episode of almost any TV program you'd care to mention.

So please forgive me for being a little upset at the news that the show is one of the nine specialist programs to be axed by the network. Others to go include *The Religion Report*, *The Ark*, *In Conversation*, *Perspective*, *Sports Factor*, *Radio Eye* and *Street Stories*.

If there's anything that listeners of *The*

Media Report would know, it's that casualties in the media industry are inevitable. But it is equally true that the quality of our media is in steady decline and that any loss of thought-provoking journalism is especially depressing. As Fairfax loses its way, Radio National had been cementing its place as one of the very last refuges for civility and fresh inquiry in the media landscape.

For example, as *The Media Report* went to air this morning, the Nine network's Today show was flogging to death a B grade Hollywood movie and prattling on about celebrity gossip. It seems to me that with the constancy of change in the media and with no other radio network capable of analysing the industry with Radio National's credibility or depth, there is a strong rationale for retaining it.

So what will we get in the place of these programs? There are reports of a

new technology show and a program called *The Futures Report*, which hopefully won't be about the stock market – because that would be too depressing. There's also talk of moving local radio's *Sunday Profile* over to RN.

Radio National says that listeners are migrating on-line and therefore the emphasis should shift in that direction. I don't share the faith that on-line happens in a vacuum, disconnected from a strong on-air presence. It is the live-to-air broadcasting of RN's programs that give them the critical mass and the relevance they need to prosper on line.

When I was on staff at RN, it was arguably a boutique network, serving less people than it ought and struggling to compete with the metropolitan or local stations. Now it is actually hip to be an RN listener with an audience which is loyal there because it can't stomach the

asinine talkback-on-pets'-names nonsense that clogs the airwaves of the ABC's other networks.

The dread I have is that Radio National will edge closer to banality. There are many hundreds of thousands of us who don't want the Canberra press gallery take on the world and book-tour driven celebrity interviewing as our staple.

We are looking for media that starts where current affairs reporters finish and which challenges us with new ways of thinking about issues or which introduces us to ideas that we'd never thought to consider. These wonderful Radio National programs did this regularly and their loss is a huge blow to the diversity of our media.

Andrew Dodd was the founding presenter of The Media Report and has freelanced for Street Stories, Radio Eye and Sports Factor.



PRESS RELEASE FROM ABC ANNOUNCING RADIO NATIONAL CUTS

ABC Radio National confirms 2009 broadcast schedule

15/10/2008

ABC Radio National today confirmed its program schedule for 2009, which starts Monday 26 January. The network returns with its highly respected diversity of programs presented by leading broadcasters including Fran Kelly, Phillip Adams, Geraldine Doogue, Robyn Williams, Norman Swan, Rachael Kohn, Ramona Koval, Alan Saunders, Richard Aedy and Michael Duffy.

The major change to the 2009 schedule will be to the daily 8.30am reports. Mondays and Tuesdays see the return of the Health Report and the Law Report respectively. These two programs will be joined by Rear Vision, moved to Wednesdays and replacing the Religion Report - it takes a look at the history of events in the news, and a new program replacing the Media Report on Thursdays - the Future Report (working title) a program that will focus on current world trends of globalisation, communication technologies, and the shifting cultural, social, political and economic responses. On Fridays, Movietime will move in featuring Julie Rigg's film culture reviews and interviews replacing Sports Factor.

Along with an increase to the amount of radio drama on offer with an extended Airplay program on Friday nights, a major development for the network will be the introduction of a new radio features program and an increase in online features content. While this exciting development sees current programs Radio Eye and Street Stories finish later in the year, these program changes allow ABC Radio National to convert a small number of positions into roles with a stronger online and digital editorial focus and to enable general enhancements to the networks website.

ABC Radio National Manager Dr Jane Connors said "Decisions to wind up programs are never easy, as all of the network's shows are made with passion and care, and each have their devoted following. The move of resources and staff, and without job losses, into the development of new content offered in new ways, including online, means ABC Radio National can respond to its hugely successful digital growth and shift in audience trends, especially amongst younger audiences."

"The statistics on ABC Radio National's digital performance are outstanding and contribute greatly in placing the ABC as a major digital broadcast player internationally."

In 2006, just a year after the network began offering podcasts, ABC Radio National had a monthly average of 765,000 podcast downloads, representing 55% or the ABC's total monthly average on 1.36 million. This year, to September, the networks' monthly average is 1.7 million podcasts downloaded - 50% of the ABC's overall average of 3.37 million - a monthly average increase for ABC Radio National of 125%. ABC Radio National radio programs attract an audience aged 50+ years or older, while online audiences for ABC Radio National are under 50.

"2008 has been a strong year for ABC Radio National and with the planned changes, 2009 offers growth in the depth and breadth of its content available, delivered in ways audiences enjoy." Dr Connors said.

Nicola Fern, Marketing Manager ABC Radio National

ABC radio cuts draw a religious sermon

Kelly Burke
Consumer Affairs Reporter
Sydney Morning Herald
October 22, 2008

AUSTRALIA'S Catholic bishops have added their voice to mounting criticisms of the ABC's decision to axe its flagship weekly radio religious affairs program.

In a statement released by Archbishop Philip Wilson, the president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Catholic Church has decried the decision to cut The Religion Report from next year's programming, arguing the move was against the public broadcaster's charter.

The program's presenter, Stephen Crittenden, has been stood aside pending an inquiry into critical comments he made about the broadcaster on air last Wednesday. He also revealed that a number of other long-running



Radio National programs, including The Media Report, The Sports Factor and Radio Eye, had been cancelled. Crittenden has since been taken off air and has been ordered by ABC management not to discuss the matter publicly.

In the bishops' statement, Archbishop Wilson said the ABC had an obligation to put more resources into less populist areas of media coverage.

"We can get more than enough of the latest celebrity gossip or political PR manoeuvres via other outlets," he said, adding that he had no doubt there would be many secularists who would cheer at the news their eight cents a day would no longer be going into funding The Religion Report. But he also conceded there was probably a few people of faith who were of the same opinion. "It certainly wasn't everybody's cup of tea," he said.

The Sydney Anglican Diocese outed itself yesterday as one group grateful for the program's demise.

Although the Primate of the

Anglican Church, Archbishop Phillip Aspinall, released an open letter to the ABC last week expressing the church's disappointment at the program cuts, the Anglican Bishop of South Sydney, Robert Forsyth, said yesterday he was "heartened" by the decision to move religion out of a specialised area and into the mainstream. "Sometimes specialist units can run the danger of becoming too close to their subject matter and present a partisan and narrow viewpoint," Bishop Forsyth said.

The Religion Report has conducted several in-depth interviews with the Sydney Anglican Archbishop, Peter Jensen, over the past five years. The program has also given voice to many opponents of the conservative Sydney Diocese. In an interview with Crittenden in January, Peter Phillips, the conductor of the renowned choir The Tallis Scholars, publicly accused Dr Jensen and his brother Phillip Jensen, the Dean of Sydney, of hypocrisy and compared them with Poland's notorious former leaders, the Kaczynski twins.

The president of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Reverend Gregor Henderson, and the president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, Ikebal Patel, also spoke out yesterday against the downgrading of religious coverage on Radio National.

No representatives of the Jewish faith were available for comment, due to the holiday of Succoth. 

Senate questions ABC axing of Religion Report

Canberra, Thursday, 16 October 2008

The Senate today supported a motion from Australian Greens Leader Bob Brown that calls on ABC management to reveal the criticisms and reasons behind the decision to axe the Religion Report, Media Report and other flagship Radio National programs.

"The Religion Report's insightful reporting and critical analysis has ruffled many feathers over the years - the sign of a highly successful program!" Senator Brown said.

"Radio National's flagship programs, whose specialist reporters have a great depth of knowledge, are what makes public broadcasting in this country so

strong. These programs have a growing audience here in Australia, internationally, and online.

"The decision to cut these programs and dumb down Radio National needs to be explained so that the growing audience of these programs understands what ABC management is doing to their broadcaster."

The motion was agreed to by the Government and Opposition. The text of the motion reads:

I move that the Senate:

- (i) Notes ABC Radio National's decision to axe the Religion Report, Media Report and the Sports Factor;
- (ii) Notes that the Religion Report is one

of the most important programs on the ABC with a rapidly growing international audience;

(iii) Notes that this program broke the Peter Hollingworth scandal, has applied critical analysis of the Exclusive Brethren, Anglican, Catholic and Muslim religions amongst others and provided insightful commentary of various religions over many years;

(iv) Calls on ABC management to publicly reveal all formal and informal criticisms made against this program over recent years; and

(v) Calls on ABC management to immediately make public the reasons for this decision. 

Radio National - Members have their say

21 October 2008

Attention: Managing Director: Mark Scott

Dear Mr Scott,

On the ABC website you summarise Radio National as "a world of ideas". One of the most direct ways I tap into these each weekday is through the 8.30am Reports. I am appalled at recent mention that the ABC might be even remotely planning to drop them. In my opinion they are key programs within the whole RN galaxy – and a pivotal part of fulfilling the ABC charter to inform the Australian community.

For me, they are a daily conduit that lets me stay up to date on in topics almost impossible to keep track of in any other way. Each half hour is a concentrated info-stream of current affairs --focussed, intelligent, world-ranging, mind-opening, timely information.

How many specialist medical journals would I have to subscribe to (let alone try to understand) to equal a Monday session with Norman Swan and the Health Report? How many issues of Catholic Weekly or Jewish News would I have waded through to keep track of events and debate that equate to 30 minutes of the Religion Report?

It's the same with the Law Report - full of insights available no other way for getting at the legal issues involved, especially in cases where the headlines are all shock/horror/spin. It also touches on legislation and human rights – vital need-to-know's you don't get in a news story or 10-sec sound bite.

I find the Media Report a powerful window into a world that has huge influence – but where it's almost impossible to get a glimpse behind the scenes. Other than ABC-TV's Media Watch, where else can an "outsider" get some understanding of what trends and pressures are operating out there?

As for Friday - I'm no sports fan, but I find the Sports Report fascinating as a way to keep up to date with what friends and family are talking about. It's good listening. And the same applies to Bush Telegraph, one of my favourite programs, notwithstanding I live in Sydney's Inner West. They ALL enrich me in that "world of ideas".

While an 8.30am timeslot suits me fine, if that has to change --I'll follow. But losing them altogether is unthinkable. I've lived in both UK and NZ and been a keen listener in both – so

I know just how rare, and good, these Reports are. The series is a huge asset for Radio National, for the ABC overall – and for Australia.

A few moments ago I was watching the Andrew Olle lecture, seeing you congratulate Ray Martin for his comments about the need (including as sound business strategy) for more journalistic depth in a multi-media world. That's what the RN Reports are all about. I urge you to keep these programs not only for their huge contribution to everyday life, like mine, but also as a matter of media savvy for now and future development.

Think RN as the ABC's goldmine for ideas – and these Reports as core sourcing. Retain them, use them, build on them as a new dimension of audience-aligned information in an ever-expanding podcast world. I'll be including this aspect in my response to the current call for public comment on Towards a Digital Future for the ABC.

If nothing else, consider the marketing potential. RN Reports would surely be an easy way to assist ABC Enterprises in fulfilling its charter to provide "high quality work which would stimulate debate on contemporary issues particularly in Australia".

Trusting this letter is one of many, and looking forward to a positive reply,
Yours sincerely

Emma Brooks Maher

To: Sue Howard

Sent: Wednesday, October 22, 2008

Subject: Religion report

I was very concerned to learn about the decision to axe the religion report. I work on human rights projects where religion can have both a negative and positive influence on the decisions in Australia and other countries. The religion report is excellent at drawing out these contradictions and identifying the religious ideas and institutions which influence secular debates. The Federal Attorney-General is expected to announce a public consultation on how human rights can be protected in Australia; religious representatives

have already tried to influence this consultation process. In this consultation, it will be important for the ABC, and particularly programs such as the religion report to contribute to the information and debate in the community.

If the decision to remove the program is not changed I hope that the elements of the religion report which perform this function can be undertaken in other programming on a regular basis, and that the expertise of the producers and journalists are not lost, but used to produce similar material.

Brendan Bailey
Senior Policy Officer
Public Interest Advocacy Centre

20 October 2008

Mr Mark Scott,
Managing Director Australian
Broadcasting Corporation

Dear Mr. Scott

On October 15th I heard Stephen Crittenden say that the Religion Report was to be scrapped. He sounded angry; I felt stunned. Later, I found out that the Media Report and the Sports Factor were also to be removed, in favour of such lighter-weight programmes as "Movietime". Apart from my disappointment at losing some programmes which I listen to regularly, I thought it was a strange decision to change that neat selection of interesting and informative programmes which are unforgettable because of their regular 8.30 am slots.

You have been quoted in 'Update', V 01.16, No.8, as saying that "A public service broadcaster does not simply have to be passively available to everyone, but should strive to be used by nearly everyone." No doubt passivity is not as productive as striving, but which 'everyone' are you referring to? I listen regularly to the morning Reports, and I can assure you I don't do so passively. On the other hand, when sometimes I listen to the Sports Factor - that is the report

in which I have least interest - I listen quite passively, without anything like the same attention. This doesn't mean that I think sports programmes should be removed: I know a majority of 'everyone' enjoys it greatly. Where does the striving come in? Does it mean that producers strive to find the kind of programmes to which most of 'everyone' will listen, bringing high ratings?

Radio National seems to me to serve the same purpose as the BBC's Radio 3. If the ratings prove to be a little lower than the more 'popular' stations (as is true of Radio 3), you might bear in mind that not 'everyone' wants lighter-weight programmes - such as Spicks and Specks. These are well represented in almost every other broadcasting outlet, both public and commercial.. You have said that "Radio National is one of the jewels in the crown of the ABC": why do you want to disfigure the gem by abrading it?

I am of a generation (born 1927) to whom you are offering digital advances. Some of us may welcome this; but others either cannot handle the difficulty of the purchasing of equipment and the learning of new techniques and the time taken away from our preoccupation with tidying up our affairs before leaving home'. We also are 'everyone', and wish that you wouldn't take away those experiences which still bring us stimulation and involvement while we still survive to enjoy them.

Yours sincerely

Mrs. Barbara J. Revill

Dear Friends of the ABC,

I've rallied from my feelings of despondency and disappointment after hearing of the cuts to RN broadcasting schedule for 2009 and have made it my business (after all isn't it incumbent on us all?) to be aware of what is happening with our precious ABC, in particular Radio National. After wading through so much info on the websites at least I now feel less helpless and have written letters to Mark Scott, Sue Howard and Jane Connors.

One of the fantastic things with the

net is that info is so readily and quickly available to us. Ironically technology and the digital age may be the thing that puts the death knell on 'listening in' to the radio. Something I have loved dearly over the years, from sitting around the wireless as a child to carrying out boring housework listening to fabulous RN sessions on my tranny. It's somehow not the same wired to an MP3 player.

Thank goodness for Bob Brown's motion in the senate with bipartisan support, for ABC management to reveal the criticism and reasons behing the axing of so many RN programmes, and make them public. From now on I'm very interested in Senator Stephen Conroy.

I will definitely read the discussion paper re future directions and digital technology. I don't know what to make of the RN online survey re listening/web habits. There was no mention of programming and radio listening habits only questions re use of the net, podcasting etc.

The ABC media release dated 15/10/08, with the usual dose of spin, points out that the move of resources to ?more worthy programmes will be done without job losses. Wonder whether Stephen Crittenden's emotional on-air comments may consign him to the same fate as his programme?

What a loss to see The Religion Report axed. The nature of the programme, of comparative religion and questioning the politics of religion surely is critical to our society, particularly from our public broadcaster in the quest for balance and for education of those in the community who are interested in learning about religion without indoctrination.

Thank you Mal for the time and effort you devote to the FABC. Hope other 'friends' are fired up enough to be proactive. With the current economic climate and the frenzied pace of modern life we need more fairdinkum, reflective programmes such as Radio Eye, Street Stories, Perspective etc,etc not less!

Dianne Quinn
Parramatta FABC

17 Oct 2008

Letter to the Editor (To 15 regional and city newspapers and to ABC Orange)

Sir,

Without consultation of any kind and apparently in the case of at least one program, as a result of external pressure being applied, the Board of the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) is cutting nine popular programs from Radio National.

They are; The Ark. In Conversation. Media Report. Perspective. Radio Eye. Religion Report. Sports Factor and Street Stories. Also to be axed but to remain on the air until produced programs run out, is Short Story.

Our public broadcaster is the only source for many Australians especially for those engaged in primary production, of up to date news and background information tailored to their specific needs as producers. It seems to have fallen into the hands of bean counters and ideologues who lack the intestinal fortitude to stand up to external pressures and influences by which the ABC is seen as subversive because it does not tug the forelock to the powers that be.

The programming cuts are a form of censorship, a denial of our right not to be supplied simply with feel good entertainment, but to be supplied also with information which makes us think, and sometimes even dare to demand answers from the decision makers both in private enterprise and government.

If as I am, you are appalled by what is being done to Radio National and believe it is the thin edge of the wedge for the ABC generally, make your feelings known.

Engage with the Friends Of The ABC in their opposition to what is being done. write to or phone the ABC and or voice your concerns to your local MP.

Barry Smythe

Attention: Mark Scott - General Manager ABC

Sue Howard - Director of ABC Radio

Jane Connors - Manager, Radio National

Dear Mr Scott, Ms Howard and Ms Connors

I am writing to express my great concern at the mooted decision by ABC management to axe a number of

programs: The Media Report; In Conversation; Perspective; Radio Eye; Short Story; Street Stories; The Religion Report; The Ark; The Sports Factor; etc.

I am an avid listener to Radio National and regard it as a source of almost invariably well researched and presented balanced public information on a broad range of matters and one of the essential ingredients in Australia's intellectual life. To shrink the scope of what is provided is to diminish the breadth and value of that provision. This is to all our disadvantage.

While it is true that the ABC is not the only possible source of such information, for anyone with a busy life it provides a shorthand survey of what is pertinent contemporary news, research and opinion. It also is a realisation of the ABC's charter to provide such breadth and depth of ideas and information.

I despair at the buckling of an institution like the ABC to the pressure of governments and/or populist bottom line attitudes to the purpose of the ABC, that such diminution is being contemplated. For many people ABC Radio National is the only reliable means of keeping abreast of ideas and opinion which offsets the isolation of geographic remoteness, old age, disability or any number of other inhibiting constraints.

I strongly urge you to reconsider this decision so as not to deprive your devoted fans of the richness and diversity of what we value so highly - your unique service to the people of Australia.

I also am concerned at the ABC's censorship through suspension of Stephen Crittenden, for daring to make his gentle protest at this slashing. What has happened to freedom of expression?

While I am at it, though Artworks does what it does well, the visual arts fares the worst of all artforms in Radio National's arts coverage and deserves much more fulsome attention!

Yours sincerely

Tamara Winikoff
Executive Director, National Association
for the Visual Arts (NAVA) 

Illawarra Branch Lobbies Local MPs

Chris. Cartledge

In October 2008 a delegation from the Friends of the ABC Illawarra Branch visited their local government MPs to lobby for the ABC's triennial funding proposal, the board appointment process and the re-instatement of the staff elected director.

We visited Jennie George MP (Throsby) and Sharon Bird MP (Cunningham) and were well received. In preparation we wrote a two page discussion paper, highlighting the points we were to raise. This was supported with a letter from the Minister's Office dated 2 May 2008 wherein he made certain commitments about the topics we were to discuss. We also attached the document 'Funding benchmarks – beyond the ski slope' which graphically shows the changes in funding since 1985/6. All these documents are available from telledge@bigpond.net.au



Firstly, we pointed out the timing of the triennial funding process (thanks Jill Greenwell – ACT). Understandably, they were not aware of the critical windows in which we could influence the Minister and then the Cabinet Expenditure Review Committee. We indicated we would be most grateful if they could also represent our views to the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance and Deregulation at any opportunity they may have.

We then pointed out that it was the Hawke and then the Keating Governments that started cutting funding for the ABC in real terms. Although the Howard Government made a savage \$66M cut in 1996, funding has been on a 'ski slope' since 1985/6.

We asked that adequate funding is provided now so that:

- The ABC can remain independent of advertising on all its platforms
- The ABC can recommence the production of Australian drama (practically nil at present)
- The ABC can start broadcasting on the

ABC Kids channel ABC3 (ready to go)

We then pointed out that we had correspondence from the Minister's office dated 2 May 2008 stating "The Government will also restore the staff-elected Director position on the ABC Board, which was abolished by the previous Government". It had been almost a year since the Rudd Government was elected and there are now two vacancies on the ABC Board and that we could see no reason why the Staff Elected Director could not be appointed immediately.

The final topic we raise is the method of appointment of ABC Board members. In the same letter from the Minister's office it was stated that "in line with its election commitment, the Government plans to introduce a new ABC Board appointment process".

We applauded this commitment but question the timetable considering the concluding statement in the abovementioned letter. "The Government is moving quickly to implement these arrangements to ensure greater transparency, accountability and public confidence in the ABC".

We visited Sharon Bird on 8 October 2008. Immediately prior to our visit she had rung the Minister's Office to enquire about the timing of the



promises made in the above letter. Ms Bird was pleased to tell us that she had been assured that by the time her letter (re our visit) reached the Minister's office that an announcement on the above issues would have been made.

The Minister's media release covering the new board appointment process and the appointment of the staff elected director was made on 16 October 2008 and is available on the FABC NSW website. It is vital we continue lobbying for the ABC's triennial funding proposal whilst the window of opportunity is still open. 

Coverage of Radio National Issue in SMH Letters

17/10/08

Aunty's managers must relearn their ABCs of Quality

The ABC, including Radio National, covers religious affairs exceptionally well. I am always tripping over devoted fans of programs such as The Religion Report who have no religious belief.

So it was with concern that I read about the possible axing of this program next year. Analysis of religion is vital because of its influence on personal belief systems. From there to behaviour, in one abrupt step.

If we don't have access to unbiased, specialised, comprehensive coverage of religious affairs, we are not just ignoring one particular elephant in our social lounge room. Given the plurality of belief in Australia, we are dismissing a herd of pachyderms.

The ABC's religious affairs coverage should be defended loudly by anyone who cares about society, psychology, culture, politics, ethics, life views, history, ideology, gender issues, values, oh, and spirituality ..

Margaret O'Connor Cook (ACT)

The axing of key Radio National programs represents a further erosion of the importance and relevance of this mighty broadcaster.

We need the independent voice of Radio National; we need its innovative, creative and engaging programs that tell us about ourselves.

If, as the Herald reported, the ABC needed an extra \$48.1 million for 2008-09 to sustain its output, it should have it. If the ABC is broke, the Federal Government should fix it.

Sandra Symons Woollahra

The axing of The Religion Report is a management failure. If the suits at the ABC cannot see that The Religion Report has been the best single-subject program on the radio for the past decade, then they are useless at their jobs.

Stephen Crittenden is easy to listen to, well informed and not afraid of an argument. In their "race to the bottom" of commercial success, the Scotts and Milans of this world flee to the blandness of pop and inoffensive commentary in their search for a youth demographic.

I think that's short-changing young people, who can have a good time but still want to hear the airing of religious and moral controversies.

Geoff Mullen McMahons Point

Sometimes brilliant people need to be given space and freedom. In Conversation provides just that. Week after week Robin Williams expertly interviews some of the world's leading scientists, affording them the space to discuss those subjects most important to them. The BBC, in its overproduced, structured manner, has nothing that comes near Radio National and its reporting of scientific thought. In Conversation is unique in its free flowing style, allowing science to be articulated clearly and carefully. Regardless of shifts in audience demographic or digital delivery; listeners need content, which In Conversation delivers at the highest level.

Michael Hooper London

21/10/08

Last week the Herald reported the demeaning comment by Jane Connors, the manager of Radio National, that the cancellation of several programs was driven in part by the fact that on-air broadcasts attracted principally an over-50s audience, while the online version attracted a younger listenership. This attitude shows an astonishing ignorance of demographics, as the Herald has just reminded us (Over-65s to double by 2036", October 20). Surely an implication of those trends is that the potential audience for Radio National will increase enormously in the very 1 age groups that ABC management seeks to spurn and marginalise.

John Carmody Roseville

22/10/08

Time for ABC critics to take a cold shower

As a senior ABC employee (writing in a personal capacity) I think it is time there was some more thorough journalism, and perhaps a cold shower, on the issue of program changes at Radio National.

Contrary to the impression given by your article, staff cuts at the ABC do not affect the station. It has been said in many stories that religion has been axed from the network; it has not. Indeed there are plans to invigorate its presence next year.

Stephen Crittenden had a good future with the network, and all issues were talked through thoroughly with him before any public announcement. Over the 30 years I have been associated with the network there have been program changes from time to time, and each has been received with similar histrionics from some staff and listeners who don't like change.

The media should spend a little more time getting the full story. These changes have taken a year of careful working through, and most of us support them. Radio National cannot remain static, and its core of specialisation is not threatened.

Kirsten Garrett Executive producer, Background Briefing, Paddington

23/10/08

ABC needs vigorous discussions, not web offerings

The broad issues at stake in the controversy surrounding Radio National are not new. The science broadcaster Robyn Williams wrote a whole book on the unique value of specialised broadcasting (Normal Service Won't Be Resumed, Allen & Unwin) in 1996 when the ABC was being savagely cut by the Howard government. It warrants re-reading by ABC management.

The issues revived now that demand thorough exposure include the assumption that putting something on the web equates to a regular broadcast. The ABC's most substantial material on the web is derivative of well-researched and produced programs. A "portal" for religion, as the ABC's managing director, Mark Scott, proposes, is a poor substitute for a vigorous broadcast. Stuff on the web may be voluminous and useful for replay and reference but it almost never raises any eyebrows.

It is the broadcasting of specialised programs which gives standing to web offerings, brings a flow of unique information to the ABC, tests it openly in the public forum and demands longstanding commitment by the ABC to supporting its practitioners. They need adequate air time, staffing, facilities and management support when raising controversial public issues.

The ABC's commitment to specialised programs and programmers is tenuous. It has no cadet training scheme and offers no paths for fresh talent to enter the various fields.

If the ABC's investigation into critical comments made on air by Stephen Crittenden is limited to internal maneuvering over authority between levels of management and program makers and is aimed primarily at disciplining Mr Crittenden, its findings will be seen as an internal whitewash. This will do the ABC no good in presenting a convincing case to the government's wide-ranging review of public broadcasting.

Rather, the serious conflict between public criticism and internal defence warrants reconciliation via a comprehensive and open inquiry.

Peter Pockley, Founding Director of ABC Science Unit Glebe



23/10/08

Ungodly change is no solution to Aunty's salvation

By writing opponents off as people who don't like change, Kirsten Garrett does Radio National listeners a great disservice. She appears to forget that the ABC is a national broadcaster funded by the public for (supposedly) the public good. On what basis does management suddenly believe that axing all the 8.30am programs is necessary?

Contrast the ABC's attitude to that of the American Public Broadcasting Service and its flagship program, Jim Lehrer News Hour. It has been running for decades, with very few changes.

I have listened to The Religion Report for years. Stephen Crittenden does not strike me as the histrionic type. He is one of the best journalists on deck. He had the courage and passion to speak out for the public good. If only ABC management had as much regard for ABC tradition and listeners.

David Jordan Dee Why

Kirsten Garrett doesn't get it. We, the eight-cent-a-day audience, trust that Stephen Crittenden still has "a good future with the network". It may be that "the changes have taken a year of careful working through" but this is the first that we've heard of them and we don't want them.

Jan McCarthy Blackheath

In a miraculous piece of circular argument, Kirsten Garrett preaches the doctrine that the media should make greater efforts to "get the full story". Surely this is exactly what the soon-to-be-axed Religion Report aims to do and does well.

Megan Brock Summer Hill

As a former senior ABC employee, I agree strongly with Kirsten Garrett that Radio National cannot remain static, and it is vital that its "core of specialisation is not threatened".

However, not all critics of the decision to drop three of its best specialist programs are "staff and listeners who don't like change".

Some changes can be improvements, some are not. The Religion Report, The Media Report and The Sports Factor are exactly what the network should be featuring on air and online.

The presenters are experienced and dedicated broadcast journalists who keep coming up with interesting and different perspectives. It's a welcome change to much of what's available across Australian broadcasting.

Ian Wolfe Bowral



RADIO NATIONAL UNDER THREAT

19 October, 2008

Dear Friends.

If you are a Radio National listener, or ever have been, you must be alarmed that the ABC will be cutting some of its finest specialist programs in 2009.

The following will all disappear from next year's line-up:

- The Religion Report
- The Media Report
- In Conversation
- The Ark
- Perspective
- Radio Eye
- The Sports Factor
- Street Stories.

Were it not for Stephen Crittenden's announcement at the start of 'The Religion Report' last Wednesday (15 October) we probably still would not know what the ABC has in store for us, its listeners. It is unprecedented for an ABC presenter to plead for his program. However it is in the interest of all of us to know when the ABC is, in effect, vacating a field of informed public discussion and stimulation, let alone a whole number of them.

The ABC has now revealed its justification for the changes. Axing these specialist programs will enable "ABC Radio National [to] respond to its hugely successful digital growth and shift in audience trends, especially amongst younger audiences" Apparently the replacement programs are to be more 'consumer focused' - meaning consumers aged under 50.

Note that it is not suggested by the ABC that the current programs are in some way unsatisfactory. There is no suggestion that they fail to fulfil the ABC's Charter obligation to 'inform and entertain and reflect the cultural diversity or the Australian community'. The basis for their replacement is solely the suggested consumer demand.

As an independent public broadcaster, the ABC has a statutory obligation to "provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs". Mark Scott (ABC Managing Director) has said he wants the ABC to be like the town

square - but a town square with a hurdy-gurdy and no soapbox? He has also said that he wants the ABC to be 'relevant'. But relevant to whom? There is grave danger that the search for a bigger audience - for higher ratings - will eliminate the many audiences who have depended on the specialist offerings which the ABC - and only the ABC - gives. Further, without distinctive and specialist journalism, Radio National, far from standing out as highly relevant, will be camouflaged in the jungle of mediocrity.

The ABC has an obligation to lead community discussion about controversial topics. It can do that only if it has specialist broadcasters and producers. Yet in Stephen Crittenden's criticism of the ABC's decision he said, "The ABC specialist units have been under attack for years but the decapitation of the flagship program of the religion department effectively spells the death of religion at the ABC. That such a decision has been taken in an era when religion vies with economics as a determinant of everything that is going on in the world almost beggars belief, but you have to remember that just a couple of years ago they axed the Environment program."

Yes we do remember. We ACT & Region Friends of the ABC protested against the decision to cut out "Earthbeat".

As Paul Collins, well-known commentator and author, said, "I don't see this as an attack on religion. It's more a lack of appreciation of specialisation".

Almost 1,000 people have lodged complaints on 'The Religion Report' website. Letters have been published in the daily papers. How many more have phoned or written to ABC Management we do not know. However we must all put pen to paper or finger to keyboard and complain long and loudly to the powers that be in the ABC.

Your letter doesn't have to be long to let the ABC know who its Friends are; it just has to be written!

Yours sincerely,

Jill Greenwell

President,

ACT Friends of the ABC



Branch News

Armidale

The re-scheduled evening of movie discussion and screening which had been cancelled in July because of the ill health of Radio National's Julie Rigg, proved to be a great success this November. Julie opened the evening event by outlining some aspects of her own career in the ABC, in particular, her role as an arts critic and her views on world cinema.



She then spoke about the making and style of the chosen film, *Son of a Lion*. Set in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, it tells the story of a sensitive boy who wants to go to school rather than follow his fundamentalist father into the local industry of gunmaking. The young Sydney-based director, Ben Gilmour, worked with his untrained Pashtun actors and supporters in storylines and scripting. Filming conditions were chaotic and dangerous, making the resulting film all the more remarkable. Julie believes that the film has not been gaining the exposure that it deserves: it is a "must see". The capacity audience agreed with her.

Armidale FABC organised the evening to support the local International Film Festival committee. As a fundraiser it was very successful. Perhaps just as importantly, it provided Friends with excellent publicity, a venue for the signing of petitions (on both the cutting of some Radio National programs and general pleas regarding non-commercialisation etc), plus the enrolment of new members. Links with other sections of the community were also reinforced.

Julie gave useful advice. She was helpful to the Film committee on accessing foreign films and on ones which could be considered for the festival next August. To Friends she stressed the importance of keeping pressure on the ABC Board and Management re programming

changes and preferences. Listeners/viewers **can** make a difference.

From her own point of view the weekend had its pleasures: she visited some childhood haunts and, as a gardener, enjoyed various of the beautiful spring gardens opened for charity. And the FABC committee revelled in the company, to quote one member, "of a very warm, charming and witty lady and an exemplary specimen of ABC quality staffing".

Central Coast

Central Coast Branch will celebrate the end of the year by inviting branch members and friends to join the committee for lunch. Date, time and venue will be advertised in the next Branch Newsletter.

Gosford Uniting Church regularly holds Community Forums on a range of issues including health, politics and affordable housing. Our branch has been asked to participate in a forum to be held in March 2009 where the topic will be The Media.

It is proposed to invite an ABC personality to represent the views of public broadcasting, as well as representatives from such areas as the print media, authors, and experts from these fields in tertiary education.

These forums are open to public participation and Central Coast FABC members will be invited to attend.

Hunter

Hunter August Function "Sunday Afternoon with Quentin Dempster".

Hunter Friends enjoyed a well attended get together at Devonshire House, Newcastle on 17 August featuring Quentin Dempster who provided a most interesting and informative address on ABC matters and political affairs. The audience also appreciated the opportunity to ask questions and seek Quentin's



Quentin addressing the Hunter gathering.

opinion on various topical issues and enjoyed the opportunity of a personal chat after his address fortified by some satisfying refreshments. Hunter Politics in the Pub supporters also shared in the event and their support was valued in this major fund raising effort. It was a privilege to host Quentin at this function and feedback from those who had attended was very positive which is not surprising considering Quentin's reputation and ability. We look forward to engaging more high profile speakers in the future to assist us in our efforts of helping to maintain a viable and enjoyable ABC in its critical role as a successful and diverse public national broadcaster.

*Peter Brandscheid
President*

Illawarra

Illawarra Branch Tenth Anniversary

The Illawarra Branch of the Friends of the ABC celebrated its tenth anniversary on September 28 with a lunch held at the Port Kembla Golf Club. Sixty-two people came to celebrate and we enjoyed a tasty meal in a beautiful setting on a lovely sunny day. We also had the pleasure of listening to our guest, ABC journalist, Monica Attard, who attended with her mother and young son, Sasha.

Monica, who has won five Walkley awards, including gold Walkley, spent

five years as an ABC correspondent in Russia and published a book, *Russia in 1997*. She began by praising the Friends' role in supporting the ABC, noting the importance of such public support, especially just now when the Federal Government is considering the next round of triennial funding. Monica explained how the ABC lacks the money necessary to produce content for the many new platforms opening up, particularly in electronic media, noting that it must already provide content for five national radio networks and three television networks. She expressed hope that



Monica Attard and Graeme Lock Lee discussing issues relevant to the ABC.

some of the damage inflicted on the ABC during the past ten years will now be reversed.

Monica noted how the ABC allows staff a great variety of work possibilities – as her own career amply demonstrates – and she had high praise for the calibre of people she works with there every day. The bulk of her talk concerned two programs she herself has been involved in and which, she insisted, could be presented only by a national broadcaster. The first of these is *Mediawatch*, which she hosted in 2006-7 and considers one of the most important programs appearing on television and one which would never find a place on any commercial network. Monica described how she had to negotiate the transition from being a television reporter to becoming a TV host and learning to present material in a studio. She was startled to discover the degree of scrutiny she was subjected to, even to minute details of her physical appearance. Reporting and commenting on colleagues could also be an ordeal, while noting the errors and carelessness in other people's publications could sometimes leave

her doubtful about ever practicing journalism again. She was also dismayed by the excuses some writers offered, when an act of plagiarism, for example, might be shrugged off by saying "I was careless". But however uncomfortable the show makes colleagues feel, she noted that nearly all of them watch it and that the program prompts journalists to be more careful throughout the forty weeks it is screened each year.

The other program Monica described is *Sunday Profile* which she now presents on Sunday evenings on Radio National. This provides her with the opportunity to profile one person who is in the news in a long interview lasting thirty minutes. She pointed out how such a conversation can generate an enormous amount of news and how the format allows a presenter to break news stories.

At the end of her talk Monica answered questions, once again expressing thanks for the support of Friends of the ABC. All her audience enjoyed what she had to say and we are grateful for the time and energy she gave in speaking to us. The occasion was a memorable tenth birthday.

Mid North Coast

Kerry O'Brien wows the mid north coast

130 people had a great night at Panthers in Port Macquarie on 19th September when Kerry O'Brien flew up specially to be FABC Mid North Coast branch's guest speaker at dinner. Kerry mingled with the crowd before and after his speech. He also answered many questions



Harry Creamer, Kerry O'Brien and Drusi Megget at Mid North Coast Branch's September dinner

and proved himself passionate about the future of broadcasting in a down to earth manner - no tickets on himself!

The branch made a small amount of money but more importantly membership has been boosted by at least 8 - and more people showing interest! Many thanks to Kerry for his generous giving of his time. And it's in a great cause – celebrating our ABC!

Drusi Megget

FABC mid north coast

Northern Rivers

Branch members in the Northern Rivers region have shown strong interest in talks given by Chris Masters and David Marr organised by the Northern Rivers Writers' Centre in Byron Bay (November 2 and November 9).

There has been widespread concern about cutbacks to Radio National programs with numerous branch members writing letters to ABC management. It is our contention that the integrity of on-air programs should not be compromised by any growth in online offerings.

Our branch members have commented on the continuing quality of TV programs such as *Australian Story*, *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent* and the spectacular *Galapagos* series of wildlife programs.

Our local members (Janelle Saffin and Justine Elliot) were active in lobbying the PM and Minister for Communications regarding ALP policy on the appointment of members to the ABC Board. We are thrilled to see the reinstatement of the ABC staff representative and will ask our local members to keep a close eye on funding for the ABC in the current economic situation.

Branch members should watch local papers for news of a pre Christmas branch meeting in December. President of the local branch, Neville Jennings, will be travelling in Japan during November.

Neville Jennings



New Teeth for Aunty

Reinvigorating the National Broadcaster

Part Two. By Robert Manne

How much did the persistent campaign about left-wing bias affect the ABC?

It could be argued that at least the ABC is now scrupulously unbiased in regard to narrow aspects of party politics. During an election campaign the main parties of government and opposition get equal time to put their case, as they should. Leaders of the parties get equally searching grillings by key interviewers, like Kerry O'Brien, Tony Jones and Chris Uhlmann, as they should. The problem with this argument is that none of this is new. It has long been the case. One of the pseudo-academic studies mentioned earlier found that the ABC had been biased towards Labor in the first two weeks of the 1998 election campaign, and then biased towards the Coalition in the third as guilty over-compensation. Another study showed that during the waterfront dispute, occasioned by the unlawful sacking of the entire MUA workforce, the sound-bite interviews conducted by the ABC had, on average, lasted one second longer with trade unionists than with representatives of the Patrick Corporation. (I swear I am not joking.) The only conclusion that could be drawn from all this was that the man who undertook these studies, Michael Warby, needed to take a long rest.

In one way the response to the accusations of left-wing bias actually improved the ABC. I think it is better, at least in theory, that right-wingers and conservatives have a more prominent voice on the ABC than once they did. Gerard Henderson of the Sydney Institute, who has moved from Keating fan to Howard lover without so much as a word of explanation, is still heard regularly on Radio National's Breakfast. He has proven about as enduring, about as interesting and about as difficult to remove as a rock barnacle at Circular Quay. On Insiders people like Andrew

Bolt and Piers Akerman appear alongside others on the Left, like David Marr. On Radio National Michael Duffy is now trying to play the long-sought-after role of a right-wing Phillip Adams. And on Difference of Opinion representatives of the neo-liberal think-tanks have regularly appeared. I said that this was a good development "in theory" for a particular reason. One of the problems of Australia (unlike the United States or Britain) is the absence of intelligent conservatives able and willing to contribute in the public sphere. It is impossible to think of people like Andrew Bolt and Piers Akerman, philistines of the first order, as the cultural equivalents of David Marr, the sophisticated biographer of Patrick White, or of Michael Duffy as an equivalent to Phillip Adams in range, intelligence, curiosity or humour. Nonetheless, in the absence of classier alternatives it is better that such voices should now be heard on the ABC than that the Right not be heard at all, as was more usual in the past.

In my opinion the long campaign

Almost certainly as a result of pressure from the board, one of the most worthless and irresponsible British documentaries, *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, was shown during prime time on ABC Television...

against left-wing bias at the ABC, however, did far more harm than good. We live in a country where 70% of the press is owned by the Murdoch corporation. As a result of the campaign against left-wing bias, the kind of criticism that the ABC should be able to mount against its

influence, the kind of balance it should be able to maintain, is now considerably eroded. Let me give a narrow example and two broad ones. Under Stuart Littlemore, Richard Ackland, David Marr and Liz Jackson, the ABC's Media Watch was once able, among many other things, to put pressure on the Murdoch press. At the beginning of this year, Media Watch was less politically combative than it had been under the previous presenters. Yet as the campaign about the left-wing bias of the program gained momentum, the Murdoch masthead in Australia, the Australian, waged an unbalanced and obsessive campaign against it. For every three minutes of Media Watch criticism of the Australian, banner headlines and thousands of frequently irrational words flowed. The relentless campaign against the program drove both the presenter and the producer to resign, for reasons that are more than understandable. As she showed in her time in Yeltsin's Russia, Monica Attard is probably the finest and most feisty foreign correspondent the ABC has ever had. In her final Media Watch, Attard showed that she had not been cowed by the Australian, revealing the misdemeanours of both the business reporter Matthew Stevens, who copied word-for-word questions contained in an email of a PR firm hired by a health-care company facing hostile takeover, and of the "colourful" Caroline Overington, who promised one of the independent candidates in Wentworth great publicity if she delivered her preferences to Malcolm Turnbull. Despite the brave joint Roman suicide of Attard and her producer, Tim Palmer, the value of Media Watch has probably been irreparably destroyed.

More serious is the case of the ABC and Iraq. It was in part because of the Murdoch press's continuing support for the catastrophic invasion and occupation of Iraq that the Howard government was able to escape the political fall-out that it deserved, of the kind that Bush in America and Blair in Britain faced. Senator Alston's attack on AM served as a salutary warning. The ABC has been muted in its criticism of government policy in Iraq ever since. It is now aware of the

dangers of “going too far”. On Iraq, ABC Television is now more likely to conduct an interview with Christopher Hitchens, who knows next to nothing about the Middle East, than it is with Robert Fisk, a journalist of strong views but also a profound understanding of the region. Reasonably often, over the past few years, both the architects of the invasion of Iraq, like Harlan Ullman, the author of the idea of “shock and awe”, and its most extreme right-wing supporters, like William Kristol, Daniel Pipes, Robert Kagan, Mark Steyn or Frank Gaffney, have appeared on Lateline. Appearances by left-wing opponents of the war have been rarer. In the period before the recent election, if ABC Television had interviewed people of similar ideological extremity, like Noam Chomsky, John Pilger or Tariq Ali, in my view the Howard government, the ABC board, the Australian newspaper and the right-wing commentariat would have interpreted the interviews as evidence of gross left-wing bias. For the ABC, there would have been a considerable price to pay. As bullies understand, intimidation works.

Let me take another equally important example. Almost certainly as a result of pressure from the board, one of the most worthless and irresponsible British documentaries, *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, was shown during prime time on ABC Television, although the subsequent discussion was handled with such intelligence by Tony Jones that it probably had no effect. Yet in the same period the question of the Howard government’s deplorable denialist record on global warming, until very recent times, was conspicuously avoided. This year two important books on this topic were published, Clive Hamilton’s *Scorcher* and Guy Pearse’s *High and Dry*. So far as I am aware, Hamilton has not been interviewed on ABC Television. Pearse has appeared on *Difference of Opinion*, but even then was described, rather nervously, as the author of a “controversial” rather than of an authoritative book. Nervousness in matters connected with the most ideologically sensitive issues of the day has represented the prevailing mood of the ABC. A

typical example was the predictable unwillingness to publish Chris Masters’ biography of Alan Jones.

This nervousness on questions of political and ideological sensitivity has mattered very greatly. On many

With the election of the Rudd government there is some reason to feel optimistic about the future of the ABC.

domestic issues, like reconciliation and the mistreatment and military repulsion of refugees, the Howard government acted in a manner that would have shocked previous generations even of Liberal parliamentarians.

And on the most important international issues of our era – global warming, the War on Terror, the struggle to reduce global poverty, the settlement of the Israel–Palestinian question – the Howard government followed with lamb-like loyalty all the policies of the Bush administration. As a consequence, if a spectrum covering the ideological positions of democratic governments on global issues had been designed, the Howard government would have found itself positioned alongside the Bush administration on the extreme Right. On both domestic and international questions, then, there has never been a time when intelligent criticism of an Australian government was more vital than over the past years, for the nation to have been able to see what it had become and even to see where Australia now stands in the community of nations. But there has also never been a time when the ABC was less likely to mount sustained criticism of such a kind. The reason seems to me to be simple. The long campaign about left-wing bias and staff capture, mounted by the government and its ideological supporters, gradually reduced the political self-confidence and thus the political independence of the ABC.

It is uncontroversial that the second reason the Howard years were difficult for the ABC was financial. In the decade before the election of the Howard government the ABC’s revenue sharply declined in real terms. In 1997 it lost a further 10% when the maintenance of the ABC’s funding turned out to have been one of John Howard’s non-core promises. The ABC then reached a lower plateau of funding than at any time in the recent past. It has never really recovered.

In my view the main impact has not been in the area of documentaries and news and current affairs, except for the ludicrous foreshortening of television programs’ seasons, where Christmas comes earlier and ends later every year. Nor has it been so noticeable in the area of comedy where, despite the political and fiscal stringencies, the ABC still manages to be the national nursery for comic inspiration. Kath & Kim created an enduring image of the new suburban consumer culture no less memorable than the one Barry Humphries had long ago created of suburban life in the more modest ’50s and ’60s, with Edna Everage and Sandy Stone. Kath & Kim allowed suburban Australians to see themselves reflected in a Luna Park distorting mirror, and to laugh at what they saw without discomfiture, as if they were peering simultaneously at a self-portrait and at a portrait of a foreign tribe. Nor was this program an isolated achievement. The anarchic *Chaser* boys have revived and extended, to general amusement, the great national tradition of what is technically known in this country as taking the piss, while Chris Lilley, in *We Can Be Heroes* and *Summer Heights High*, has provided an astonishingly penetrating and perceptive portrait of the local variant on that more general contemporary Western condition, the culture of narcissism.

The main impact of ABC financial decline and retreat is, rather, in the area of film and drama. A recent survey on *Crikey* revealed what I had long suspected, namely that drama on ABC Television has now not only reached an all-time low as a percentage of overall spending, but

also that, in the year 2006–07, of the 20 most popular ABC television dramas only two had been domestically produced. I have also read that Australian-produced drama has declined from 100 hours in its heyday to a present, paltry 20 hours. When Matthew Parris of the *Spectator* was recently in Australia, he was only half-joking when he observed that he saw more British television in Sydney than he did in London. Despite my sincere appreciation of British television, all this seems to me significant and disappointing. The ABC was once the most important supporter of this kind of Australian creativity.

Often, in such different programs as *The Road from Coorain*, *Brides of Christ*, *The Leaving of Liverpool*, *The Shark Net*, *Changi* and now *Rain Shadow*, ABC dramas have provided reflections of Australia's past and present, allowing us to see in individual stories the processes and experiences through which the national sensibility has been shaped. Sometimes, as in *The Fast Lane* or *Grass Roots*, they have provided memorable and unflattering images of what contemporary urban life and character is like. Sometimes, as in *True Believers* or *Bastard Boys*, they have provided the opportunity to argue about our political history, and reminded us, pace John Howard, that history can never be told as an uncontested, uncontestable, single-perspective narrative. Sometimes what has been produced has genuinely broken new ground. I think, for example, of John Clarke, Bryan Dawe and Gina Riley's series, *The Games*, where the curious quality of life, both local and cosmopolitan, in the media-drenched postmodern world was illuminated with genius. And sometimes, as in the idyllic *SeaChange* – an enchanting fantasy about the restoration of community in a fragmented world – a deceptively simple and gentle drama has allowed the nation to think about the way we live now, about what we ought to value, about the kind of world that we have lost.

In my view, the role the ABC has played as sponsor of these kinds of distinctively Australian drama is no less important than the role it has played as a site of intelligent political

criticism. If the political independence of the ABC has allowed us to see more clearly what our nation might be and what it has become, imaginative ABC commissioning of original film and drama has provided a variety of national images, allowing us to see, from many angles, the collective experiences that have contributed to making us who we now are. None of the series or dramas I have discussed would have been commissioned by commercial television. The ABC as a patron of film and drama is far more important to the project of national self-consciousness and self-criticism than it is customarily understood. Its steep and steady decline in this area is of far greater national significance than either side of politics is willing to admit.

With the election of the Rudd government there is some reason to feel optimistic about the future of the ABC. The culture war will come abruptly to an end. Without a friendly government receptive to its bilious views, the right-wing commentariat will lose most of its cultural clout. The absurdity of having people like Brunton, Albrechtsen and Windschuttle on the ABC board will also be instantly transparent. In time, they will be replaced. If they had any honour, they would resign. As their presence has completely delegitimised the system of government control over appointments to the board, a collective sigh of relief will be heard from all but the most blinkered cultural warrior when, as Kevin Rudd has promised, a new more BBC-like system of non-partisan appointment is introduced.

In my mind, the far less certain matter is that of future funding. I was interested to read in Margaret Simons' new book, *The Content Makers*, that hopes for a serious increase in funding for the ABC ought not to be entertained. I wondered why this was so. In an election campaign in which both sides of politics promised tax cuts over five years of more than \$30 billion and made other promises of an almost equivalent amount, it seemed to me astonishing that the case for, say, a 10% increase in ABC funding could be dismissed as

unrealistic even by someone as friendly to the ABC as Simons. There are many different kinds of public goods which necessarily compete with each other. The impoverishment of the ABC is not a natural state of affairs. With an additional \$100 million a year targeted at the more creative aspects of the ABC's mission, that dimension of the nation which one might call its spirit or its soul would be enormously enriched. Why is this hope foolish?

Part 1 of this article may be found in Update Vol. 16 No. 7

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