

## The 2009 Federal Budget will make or break the ABC

A word from the NSW President - Mal Hewitt



The Budget to be handed down by the Rudd Government in May is of critical importance to the ABC, and will determine whether it retains its

position as a world-renowned public broadcaster, free of commercial and political influence, or continues an already discernible slide into mediocrity. ABC funding for the next three years is now in the hands of Treasurer Swan, Finance Minister Tanner and Prime Minister Rudd.

If we accept 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," we must also accept that the Australian community and government must be prepared to pay a lot more for that public broadcaster. In 2004/5, the BBC, a comparable broadcaster, received \$107 per person in the UK – the ABC's income was \$41.40 per Australian.

Funding has been eroding since 1986. Australian-produced drama is a small fraction of 20 years ago. Outsourcing has become a fact of life as the ABC has lost the capacity and the infrastructure to make in-house

productions. Four years ago, a KPMG audit, initiated by the Howard government but never released, recommended an immediate 10% increase in funding if the ABC was to be able to maintain existing levels of production.

### THE COST OF KEEPING PACE WITH THE WORLD

The ABC has very effectively embraced the digital revolution in broadcasting, and leads the world in podcasting and vodcasting. But this has happened without major additional funding from the government – the money to do this has been taken from traditional broadcasting of radio and television, leaving the ABC with greatly diminished capacity for in-house television production, and radio units running on little more than fresh air!

Do we want an ABC which keeps commercial production houses in business by outsourcing, which cannot allow its dwindling specialist units to cover vital issues in depth and breadth, or denies a Chris Masters the resources to produce another "Moonlight State?" If not, I urge you to contact your local Federal MP. If Labor, ask that they raise the matter of ABC funding in caucus; if Liberal, that

they use Question Time to pursue the issue.

We acknowledge the work of FABC ACT in keeping the ABC high on the political agenda, and several FABC branches have ensured that their local members are active on the case - see letters from Bob Debus (Blue Mountains) and Julie Owens (Parramatta) elsewhere in Update. We thank Jill Greenwell (ACT FABC) for providing us with a Guide for Prospective Lobbyists.

We also report elsewhere on the energetic attempts by SkyNews to take over the Australian Network TV Service, through which the ABC currently broadcasts into Asia and the Pacific, supported by funding from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

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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](http://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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and Trade. SkyNews also sees itself as the appropriate vehicle for a digital children's channel (no doubt with the generous support of McDonalds and Coke!) Another issue to raise with our political representatives.

### FEDERAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW INTO ABC AND SBS

Approximately 2,500 submissions were received by Minister Conroy – we hope that an outcome is more speedily arrived at than is the case in some of the other government reviews! The submission from NSW FABC is reproduced in this Update, as is a submission from Quentin Dempster, our "Staff-Elected Director in Exile."

### RADIO NATIONAL

The sweeping changes to the Radio National program lineup which produced such an extraordinary and negative response from listeners in late 2008 are now a fact of life. Sadly, but predictably, the RN audience is the poorer as a result of the changes. We have lost the breadth and detailed weekly analysis of programs like the Religion Report, the Media Report, The Ark, In Conversation, and none of the exciting new and innovative programming promised by management talking heads seems to have materialized.

Stephen Crittenden, in the opinion of many the most knowledgeable and experienced broadcaster on religion anywhere in the world, has been "re-assigned" to Background Briefing, where his specialist knowledge is of little use, surely one of the more bizarre examples of the use of skills and experience by ABC management.

Letter-writers to the ABC on the matter of program changes were generally articulate, logical and direct in their questions regarding the decisions which had been made. They were insulted by form-letter replies, couched in non-specific management-speak and feel-good generalities. One such letter, from Margaret Cassidy, Head, National Networks, is reproduced in Update, along with Adrienne Shilling's reply to her (Adrienne is a NSW FABC member), We have also reproduced the increasingly frustrated series of open letters to Mark Scott from Peter

Pockley, Founding Head, ABC Science Unit.

### A CHANGING ABC CULTURE

The Radio National problem reflects a widening gap within the ABC between creative people who make programs, and management people who determine the budgets upon which those programs depend. Program makers of long standing are finding the relentless pressure from managers to compromise on quality and depth very debilitating. Traditional ABC values of programming based on merit are disappearing, and the assets of time, experience and dedicated staff (essential for good programs) are being steadily stripped. Long term staff speak of a loss of diversity, and moves towards presenter-led "flow-programming" (such as on 702-type local radio), the very antithesis of broadcasting of depth, insight and quality. Why? Because it's much cheaper to produce.

Many feel that the ABC is increasingly becoming simply a conduit for funds to the private sector, as more and more programs are "outsourced." One insider wryly asserts that "we are getting John Howard's ABC under Kevin Rudd." Quentin Dempster provides further insight into this changing culture in "The Price of Creative Independence at the ABC."

### CHRIS MASTERS

Without fanfare or ceremony, characteristic of the man himself, extraordinary investigative journalist Chris Masters retired from the ABC at the end of 2008, after 42 years with the national broadcaster, 25 of those years making ground-breaking programs for Four Corners. In 1983, his "Big League" program led to the Street Royal Commission in NSW, he won a Gold Walkley for his 1985 "French Connections," exposing the involvement of French government agents in the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior, and in 1987 his "Moonlight State" resulted in the Fitzgerald Inquiry, and the end of years of corruption in the Queensland government and police force.

ABC Enterprises commissioned his 2006 book on Alan Jones, "Jonestown," but in an extraordinary intervention by the ABC Board, on the laughable

grounds that publication “would almost certainly result in commercial loss,” publication was stopped. Allen and Unwin were more than happy to publish, no doubt enjoying a very substantial profit from the venture!

In 2007, Chris Masters received the Queensland Premier’s Literary Award.

He was an honoured guest at a forum held by Blue Mountains FABC, but we were concerned to hear him say that programs like “Moonlight



State” could not be produced by today’s ABC – there is simply not the budget to provide the resources of staff and time that were available in 1987 for such investigative reporting.

Friends of the ABC wish Chris a long and happy retirement. He has served the ABC, the Australian public, and quality journalism with great distinction.

Which brings us right back to the 2009 Federal Budget, and its importance to the future of our ABC.

Act now, please.

Mal Hewitt

President, NSW FABC. 

# Minister Conroy announces new ABC Board Appointments

The first appointments to the ABC Board under the Rudd Government’s “arm’s length” method of board appointments, allowing nominations from members of the public, and a selection process independent of the government of the day, putting an end, we hope, to the use of the ABC board by both major parties to provide a comfortable seat for political cronies and mates.

The new appointees are Michael Lynch, most recently CEO of London’s South Bank Arts Centre, and academic and author Julianne Schultz. Mr. Lynch is one of our most experienced arts administrators, having previously headed up the Australia Council, and was Chief Executive of the Sydney Opera House from 1998 to 2002. Dr. Schultz is the founding editor of Griffith Review, building an intellectual conversation about Australia and its place in the world. She was a senior ABC executive under both Brian Johns and Jonathan Shier, and was a co-chair of the 2020 Summit in 2008.

Minister Conroy is committed to amending the ABC Act to enshrine the Nolan Rules on board appointments, as well as the restoration of the staff-elected director position. 



Michael Lynch



Julianne Schultz



Somerville

# ADEQUATE FUNDS FOR THE ABC: EVERYBODY'S LOBBYING...

This May Budget will reveal the ABC's funding for the next three years

The film and television industry is lobbying, Mark Scott is lobbying, the Minister for Communications is lobbying, FABC is lobbying....

The Minister lobbying? Isn't he the one in charge of the ABC?

Yes, Stephen Conroy, as Minister for Communications is the Minister in charge of the ABC, and what a refreshing change to have a Minister who champions the ABC. But he

doesn't hold the purse strings. The Treasurer, Wayne Swan, the Minister for Finance Lindsay Tanner (a former Shadow Minister for Communications), Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard are the critical players in the Cabinet Expenditure Review

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**ABC Radio in particular, is a virtual lifeline to communities faced with an emergency situation and its aftermath.**

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Committee which is currently crunching the numbers for the Budget.

And of course the big worry is that in the current financial crisis the ABC will lose out.

What funding promises did this government make before the 2007 election? Encouraging but vague promises of "adequate funding"; 100 hours of Australian drama per annum. Enough wriggle room in harsh economic times.

The TV industry claims (SMH 11 March 2009) that jobs would be generated, not just in the ABC, but in the film and television industry generally and in flow-on industries, if the ABC were funded now to produce the promised 100 hours of Australian drama each year. Film production is a labour-intensive industry; the Screen Producers Association estimates that if the Government increased spending on ABC productions from the current 30 hours to 90 hours a year it would create an extra 2500 jobs and generate \$80million worth of economic activity.

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott made a similar point on AM on 12 March: funding to increase the level of Australian content "will trigger

jobs. It has a significant multiplier effect". He went to say that extra funds to the ABC "makes good economic sense as well as good sense for the Australian community".

The ABC's enormous value to the community was emphasised by Stephen Conroy (11 March, when opening ABC Showcase at Parliament House):

"The ABC plays a vital role ensuring Australians are well connected in times of crisis.

ABC Radio in particular, is a virtual lifeline to communities faced with an emergency situation and its aftermath."

This was never more clearly demonstrated than during last month's devastating Victorian bushfires, when the ABC took on the role of official emergency services broadcaster for affected areas across the state.

## **'The ABC is seriously underfunded...'**

'If the ABC doesn't get more funds it is going to lag the rest of the media industry in this country and the ABC should be the champion of the digital world' (Stephen Conroy, December 08)

But is the ABC to be starved of funds yet again?

It's not easy to get to the holders of the purse strings. It's even less easy if you're not in their electorate. However what we can all do is write to our own local Member of Parliament asking if she or he will write or speak on your behalf to the Treasurer, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Education (who has an interest in children's television you'd think).

Don't leave it to the Minister alone to plead in Cabinet. Join the lobbying yourself. Be a Friend in need!



*Jill Greenwell*  
Convenor Parliamentary  
Lobby Group (ACT & Region  
FABC) 

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# OUR MP'S ARE ACTIVE ON ABC FUNDING

## LETTERS OF NOTE

6 March 2009

To Mr Bob Debus MP  
Minister for Home Affairs  
Re ABC Funding  
Mr Debus,

I understand that the level of funding for the ABC for the next three years, is shortly to be decided.

I know that the economy is in poor shape, but an independent ABC, free of commercial influences, as an information source is essential to the maintenance of democracy. What is needed is an increase to rectify the vandalism of the Howard years, but if that cannot be, then the least which should be sought is the maintenance in real terms, of the current level of funding.

I request that you ensure that hopefully the former result, or if that cannot be, then the latter, regarding ABC funding is the decision reached on funding.

Mr Barry Smythe

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31 March 2009

The Hon. Wayne Swan  
Treasurer  
Parliament House  
PO Box 622  
CANBERRA ACT 2600Test

Dear Treasurer,

I am writing in support of increased funding for the ABC.

The ABC is known for its strong commitment to Australian productions. Increased funding

Will not only enhance the skills base and talent in the entertainment and communications industry, but also create jobs and business opportunities with the potential of more Australian Television being broadcast on shore and overseas.

The ABC's proposal of a children's television channel will increase jobs and enrich entertainment for the next generation.

The rise of digital media means that television needs to diversify and continuously push at the boundaries. The ABC needs the capacity to ensure that it is a viable competitor in new media.

Many programs on the ABC have become icons of Australian television. Increased funding will mean that this will remain the case for future generations, and that more initiatives will be developed to inform and entertain Australians.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter and my support.



Yours sincerely,  
Julie Owens MP  
Federal Member  
for Parramatta

Cc: The Hon. Lindsay Tanner MP  
Minister for Finance and Deregulation  
Sen. the Hon. Stephen Conroy  
Minister for Broadband,  
Communication and the Digital  
Economy.

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*Response from Bob Debus (Member for Blue Mountains) to representations from FABC member Barry Smythe*

Thank you for your recent emails.

In regard to Federal Government funding of the ABC, I am pleased to say that the Government is committed to adequately funding the ABC/SBS to enable them to provide Australians high-quality broadcasting services, free from political and commercial interference.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that the

national broadcasters are well placed to continue to meet the needs of the Australian public. The Government recognises the role of public broadcasting to provide equitable and widely available access to informative and comprehensive programming, including news and information.

That's why during the election, the Government committed to adequately fund the ABC and the SBS. However, the effects of 12 years of cuts to our national broadcasters by the previous Government are obvious.

The Rudd Government is currently considering submissions from ABC/SBS in Triennial Funding Review process - this will feed into the 2009-10 Budget. It is also considering submissions in response to the discussion paper - ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future - closed on 12 December 2008, including on the provision of international services. More than 2,400 submissions were received.

You might also be aware that in an earlier role, I worked for ABC National Radio, and helped establish the Life Matters Program. Recently I have met with the NSW State Director of the ABC to discuss the ABC's triennial funding arrangements. Last week, representatives of the Screen Producers Association of Australia discussed their concerns here in Parliament House about issues relating to Australian drama content, and the massive decline in requirements on our national broadcasters (They indicated that under the Howard Government, Australian drama content fell from 100 hours (in the mid 1990s) to just 7 hours in 2005).



Best,

Bob Debus MP 

# Mal Hewitt reports on his meeting with ABC Managing Director Mark Scott

As FABC NSW President I attended an informative meeting with Mark Scott at the ABC Ultimo premises on 18 February 2009, accompanied by our Secretary Treasurer James Buchanan. Mark was helpfully direct and to the point, even where matters of difference continued to exist. We had 40 minutes, and the topics discussed are summarised as follows:

## ABC Funding

ABC submissions for the forthcoming May 2009 Federal Budget, which marks the start of a new funding triennium for the ABC, focus on three main funding areas:

- (1) New initiatives including a dedicated children's channel and Australian content drama and documentaries,
- (2) Recurrent funding for existing operations to be restored to workable levels, and
- (3) Money for digital broadcasting and related facilities.

All of these are important, and because they are in the hands of the Treasurer and Finance Minister at a time of global financial stringency, FABC members should make urgent efforts to lobby the Government to provide adequate funding, particularly the recurrent funding upon which the ABC depends for day to day operations.

## ABC and SBS

In terms of the recent ministerial enquiry, Mark does not anticipate a merger between ABC and SBS and thinks that it is unlikely, except perhaps for the amalgamation of some background administrative functions.

## Content for a Children's Channel

In the event that a dedicated children's channel were funded, Mark would aim for 50% Australian content, but anticipates that that target might take some time to achieve.

## Outsourcing of TV production

We discussed recent reduction of some 35 ABC staff positions in the area of ABC TV "in-house production", which Mark defended strongly on the grounds of efficiency, in order to avoid the significant cost of retaining staff during down times between productions. Whilst this makes financial sense, we stressed the need to maintain standards and quality of content. Mark is convinced that quality will not suffer, pointing to recent "outsourced" successes like *Enough Rope* and *The Chaser*. Whilst this area remains controversial, I personally feel that this is an area where the clock will not be turned back.

## Radio National - continuing points of disagreement

Our discussion of recent changes to the programming of Radio National were frank but did not produce the responses we wanted to hear. Mark said that the money for mounting RN content online must come from within the RN budget, but otherwise there has been no attempt to cut the RN budget. He strongly maintained that the dropping of *The Religion Report*, along with eight other programs is part of a long standing review process with many precedents, and that *Religion* will be adequately covered in other areas, including "Background Briefing". There was no



Mark Scott

sign that the ABC will reverse the programming decisions recently made, and Mark was either unwilling or unable to react to our expressed concern that recent changes have provoked an unusually strong reaction amongst listeners, or that the ABC stands to gain from a more consultative approach.

At the same time Mark responded positively to address our concern that there may be a progressive disbanding of specialist units within Radio National. For instance, he says he has been in periodic informal conversations with Robyn Williams, and they are both in strong agreement on the need for science to continue as a specialist area, both now and into the future.

## Overall maintenance of content quality

In response to our expressed concern that the current and largely productive emphasis on technological change and new methods of content delivery might only be achieved at the expense of content quality, Mark appeared to be highly committed to the maintenance of quality and standards, and clearly regards quality of output as a major strength. We hope this proves to be so, and time will tell.

## Excessive Self-Advertising on ABCTV

I am well aware that many of our members feel strongly about the increased prevalence of ABC TV self-advertising of upcoming programs and product sold by ABC shops. This can be an irritant, but there is no evidence that it is intended to "soften up" the audience to accept externally paid advertising. We did not raise it as a priority with Mark, due to time constraints but also because it is a symptom of changing media norms and is defended by the ABC on the grounds of achieving a synergy between their programs and their public profile and the visual presence of ABC Shops.

## Public Broadcasting and the Big Picture

I would like to think that in terms of maintaining the presence of "public broadcasting" in this country, Australia is a world leader, and that we in the Friends of the ABC can take comfort in the very positive contribution of the ABC to the creation and maintenance of a cohesive and distinctive Australian culture over vast distances for some 77 years. Our ongoing challenge is to ensure that the ABC continues to receive sufficient funding from government so that it can continue to do so for succeeding generations.

Anyone who has visited the United States in recent times will have noticed a deplorable absence of public interest (as opposed to commercial domination) in broadcast and cable delivered content - epitomised by the so called "fair and balanced" output of one definitely unbalanced major network.

## Future dialogue with the ABC

I look forward to a continued critical but cordial dialogue with ABC management in the interests of maintaining effective public broadcasting. Together with the FABC NSW Committee, I believe that the most effective approach is to communicate from "within the tent" wherever possible. 

# Branch News

## Cowper

At the beginning of December last, FABC Cowper had a Xmas gathering at the farm of our President. This wonderful setting, nestled in the hills outside Bowraville, was ideal for our final meeting of the year where we were able to socialize and relax on the verandah and under the huge hoop pine tree for drinks and lunch. Tony and Jo have opened their home to us on a previous occasion and, knowing their great hospitality, there was no trouble getting members to attend even though it was very busy period of the year. Our sincere thanks go to them for their generosity.

Following lunch, Tony outlined what had been happening with the ABC regarding changes to Radio National, which was very high on the agenda at that time. We were unhappy with the form letters that we had received from ABC Management, which did not address our concerns, leaving us with the impression that programs were being dumbed down for the sake of an increase in audience numbers, with specialist programs like the Religion Report, the Media Report and 7 others, being removed to make way for light weight programs like Movietime with its film reviews and interviews .

Into the New Year we are still not impressed with the program changes but our concerns do not appear to worry ABC management, who have their own agenda. Their movement into new online technology has been impressive but it appears to be done at the expense of program quality and with younger viewers in mind, as there has been no extra funding to allow for these new developments. If programs deteriorate however, who is going to be bothered downloading them? An increase in funding from the Government would assist in this matter but, at this stage of the "financial crisis", can we expect much extra assistance for the ABC, despite their pre-election promise that the ABC would be "adequately funded"? They have so far failed to fulfil their promise to reinstate the staff-elected Director to the Board or fill vacancies on the Board, both of which could have been done immediately at very little cost. It appears that the ABC is very low on the Government's radar, and that the Board and Management appointed by the Howard Government will continue with their policy of reducing the impact of the ABC.

We will be discussing at our next committee meeting our real concerns

Secretary Joyce Gardener making a point.  
L to R: Lyn & Noel Walsh, Joyce Gardner, Tony Waugh President.





Tony Waugh discusses issues with some of those present.

with the upcoming (2010) review of the ABC's Australian Television contract from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The ABC receives \$20m from DFAT to provide an international television service into Asia and the Pacific.

News Ltd, through Sky News, desperately wants to take over the contract. We are very aware of the 'bias' and 'agenda' reporting that appears in News Ltd's publications and media. We have seen before how government 'gutted' Radio Australia, thus eroding the voice of Australia throughout our region and the world. What news and current affairs that comes out of Australia must be impartial. Over 85% of Australians 'trust the ABC'. We should never allow News Ltd to speak on behalf of Australia!

See here:

[www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20090306-Nothing-quite-as-it-seems-with-News-and-ABC-International.html](http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20090306-Nothing-quite-as-it-seems-with-News-and-ABC-International.html)

We also want to progress with Cowper's motion that was passed unanimously at the State Conference in 08 to form a Peak Body. If we, as Friends of the ABC, are going to support the ABC we must speak with one voice. That voice must be strong and clear. It must represent ALL states. It must be the place where all turn to, especially government and media, to get the authorized position of Friends of the ABC. We have limited resources so we must

concentrate these into one 'peak body'.

*Martin Miller, Vice-President, Cowper Branch*

## Blue Mountains

### CHRIS MASTERS MEETS BLUE MOUNTAINS FABC

On Saturday 15th November, well known journalist and television presenter Chris Masters addressed a very enthusiastic group of local ABC supporters at the Wentworth Falls School of Arts. Chris talked of his career in journalism, mentioning that early in his job he realized that if you are a good journalist a sense of responsibility to the truth and the community emerges in your work. He feels it is important not to exploit stories but to use them for the public good and benefit. From his mother, author Olga Masters, he learned that the best stories come from the human heart.

Chris talked of his early career in regional centres and feels he learned



Chris Masters

many of the skills of his craft in the country. His ten years learning in the rural arena gave him the confidence to be sceptical, and ask the difficult questions. He realized the power of the reporter to connect with society for the real public good. Two of his most influential reports were The Big League, an expose of some of the behind the scenes activities in the world of Rugby League and one on the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior. He says there were more resources to tackle the big stories in the 80's than there are now. However, he ended on a positive note and thinks the future of the ABC and quality journalism is looking bright with a number of very good young journalists emerging.

*Pam Fitzpatrick (Friends of the ABC, Blue Mountains Publicity Officer)*

## Illawarra

### An Illawarra Christmas

On December 5, the Illawarra branch of the Friends of the ABC held their annual Christmas party at the local Aboriginal Centre. Our special guest was Nick Rheinberger from local ABC radio who gave a most entertaining talk on events in his life which led him to his present job. He began by pointing out that most people are generally surprised when a radio presenter with whom they have long been familiar appears before them in the flesh. Radio, even more than television, is a very visual medium and listeners usually prefer the pictures they have formed in their own minds. Nick's suggestion – not entirely serious – was that radio announcers should perhaps appear in public wearing balaclavas to avoid disappointing their audience. On air, he believes they should follow advice he was once given by Robin Williams, and, above all, "Be Interesting!"

Nick's wide-ranging and varied career has gone from performing in childhood with his parents in numerous theatrical entertainments, to enrolling in a science degree at the University of Tasmania, where he was distracted from his studies by membership of the student dramatic society, to joining a barbershop quartet called "the pickled herring" and touring with a band of



Nick Rheinberger performing with his dobro.

professional buskers. He eventually found employment with the ABC as a comedy writer for both radio and television, contributing to such shows as Back Berner and Good News Week. Having long abandoned his proposed career as an actuary, Nick now hosts the Morning Show of ABC radio in Wollongong. He is also a musician who participates in the folk movement and further displayed his versatility by performing for the Friends on two different instruments. One was a Bolivian charango, resembling a ukulele, and the other was a dobro (or resonator guitar) made from Australian galvanized iron on which he played and sang a composition of his own.

We ended the proceedings with a sumptuous afternoon tea comprising sandwiches, Christmas cake and a variety of slices, most of it provided and baked by members of the committee. The entire occasion proved an enjoyable and successful conclusion to a busy year and we are most grateful to Nick for giving his time to come and talk to us.

*Dorothy Jones.*

## Northern Rivers

### The ABC in a Digital Age

On Thursday 19 March at the Lismore Workers Club, ABC Local Radio Online Editor, Richard Johnson addressed a meeting of the Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC. Richard was assisted by John Atkins who is online editor for the ABC Northern

Rivers station. Richard used online facilities to explain how new technologies are enhancing the traditional offerings of ABC radio and television. A dozen or so members enjoyed the presentation provided by Richard and John, providing feedback on their own uses of online services.

In introducing the presentation, Branch President Neville Jennings said: "We have recently witnessed an outstanding effort by ABC Local Radio stations during the floods in Queensland and NSW and bushfires in Victoria. While we value the traditional radio and television services of the ABC, we sometimes don't realise the extent to which the ABC has expanded its online and digital capabilities. We welcome to opportunity to hear from Richard Johnson who is based in Lismore and plays a key role in enhancing the local ABC radio services across Australia."

Mr Jennings went on to say that

"many traditional users of the ABC network are unaware of the speed with which the ABC is entering the digital, online world. Those who number themselves amongst the 'Phillip Adams poddies' or those who regularly access ABC Fora and iView may wish to share their knowledge of the new technologies being provided by the national broadcaster."

Branch members were particularly interested in what Richard had to say about the opportunities afforded by iView and the ways in which ABC Local stations are using new media to enhance their offerings. Particular emphasis was placed on ABC Contribute which is a social networking service provided by local ABC stations and monitored through reactive, community moderation.

Richard also talked about hyper-local delivery whereby the ABC had set up local transmitters in disaster-ravaged towns like Innisfail and Kinglake so that people could rebuild their communities through a local radio link and a dedicated web site.

Northern Rivers FABC branch members are looking forward to two upcoming events: The International Philosophy, Science and Philosophy Festival in Grafton on 27 June till 1 July and the Byron Bay Writers' Festival on 7-9 August.

*Neville Jennings, President, Northern Rivers FABC* 

Richard Johnson addressed a meeting of the Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC.



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# Radio National - Religious representatives meet with ABC

**On Friday 6 February 2009 representatives of the Uniting Church, the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the Anglican General Synod, met with Mark Scott the Managing Director of the ABC, to discuss religious broadcasts on the ABC.**

The faith leaders requested that:

1. the ABC maintain a religious program unit, with appropriate staff, editorial and budget resources;
2. there be a return to the broadcast schedule of a dedicated religious current affairs program along the lines of The Religion Report under the editorial control of the religion unit; and
3. specialist religious journalists continue to be employed and supported by the ABC.

Mr Scott told the faith leaders that the ABC had no plans to scrap the religion unit or to scrap specialisation in reporting, but that it proposed to continue to modify programmes, noting that in the past the Religion Report has been removed from the broadcasting schedule and brought back when appropriate.

He noted that in addition to other programming slots, religion will feature in Background Briefing which will reach a broader audience and allow for in-depth reporting. He also referred to the ABC's plans for future specialisation which will manifest itself in different ways, such as a portal on religion (archival records, research, old programs, transcripts) and program choices, looking at the best way to use all available time slots.

Mr Scott assured the faith leaders that the effects of the religious programming decisions made late last year are being considered within the review of radio currently underway.

The appointment of a new head of radio in mid-2009 will be of significance to the review. The review will provide scope to better articulate questions on specialties, digital media and rural broadcasting.

The faith leaders and Mr Scott agreed that 2009 will provide a suitable period to monitor and review the impact of the recent changes which will remain on the ABC's agenda and that the concerns expressed could be discussed further after that monitoring period.

#### **Contacts for further comment:**

Anglican - Martin Drevikovsky,  
contact via Darrin Davies  
07 3835 2210 or 0420 970 605

Catholic - Fr Brian Lucas,  
0419 243 959

Jewish - Robert Goot, 02 9360 1600

Uniting - Rev. Gregor Henderson,  
contact via Penny Monger  
0417 416 674.



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## THE RADIO NATIONAL DEBATE CONTINUES

*The following is written by FABC member Adrienne Shilling in response to a letter from the ABC. Adrienne's original letters to Mark Scott and Sue Howard were written following the standing down of Stephen Crittenden, former broadcaster of the now decommissioned RN program The Religion Report.*

OPEN LETTER TO THE ABC

#### **GIVE US BACK OUR HIGH QUALITY RADIO NATIONAL PROGRAMS ON AIR**

Dear Ms Cassidy,

Thank you for your letter of 16 March, received some five months after I first wrote to Mark Scott and Sue Howard.

To say that I am disappointed with the quality of your response is

something of an understatement, having waited so long to receive it.

Specifically, I make comments on the following points raised in your letter:

#### **Stephen Crittenden**

I find it hard to understand why the process surrounding the standing-down of Mr Crittenden cannot be made public. If it was punishment for his on-air announcement that the Religion Report was being axed in 2009, along with other programs, and that such action would 'condemn Radio National to even greater irrelevance' then why not say so? Surely it is possible to provide us with an outline of the "charges" against Mr Crittenden and the process by which his behaviour was assessed. Was it fair and transparent, and who

conducted it - Radio National management, the Board, or others? After all, as shareholders in the publicly-owned, publicly-funded ABC, do we not have a right to know?

The demise of The Religion Report and other flagship programs

You justify removal of the Religion Report - along with the Media Report, The Sports Factor, In Conversation and Radio Eye - by stating that the ABC "feels that these changes meet the needs of the majority of our audience". How can the ABC say that it knows what the RN audience needs or wants? Where is the evidence, and could we see it please? From what I hear among fellow listeners, there is ample evidence to suggest that the majority of your RN audience is begging for the reinstatement of these programs and their presenters.

With regard to your comment that you took into account "audience feedback", I would be very surprised if this feedback indicated that listeners did not wish to continue hearing the abovenamed programs and would want them axed. The ABC's online survey conducted last year, which your announcers exhorted us all to complete by bombarding the airwaves daily, had nothing to do with program content and listener preferences. Rather, it focussed solely on delivery method and was biased in favour of online and podcasting. So, was there some other form of survey the RN listeners didn't hear about?

It seems to be a non-sequitur when you state that the ABC "thinks there's a need for more original content relating to religion on ABC Online". But hang on a minute - the Religion Report always presented original content (as have the other flagship programs including some now decommissioned), so what's changed?

You say in your letter that RN's listeners wish to "broaden their experience with trusted, thought-provoking and sometimes risky content". Quite so - we do want that, but the axed programs were already providing such content, as do continuing long-time programs such as The Health Report and The Law Report - content easily transferable from radio to online and podcasting.

Contrary to your claims, it's more accurate to say that the RN audience wants more on-air, specialist programs (including about education and the environment) - not fewer. In trying to force more listeners to access programs direct online, why is the ABC is so willing to alienate its very loyal, discerning RN audience? I understand in today's world that the ABC needs to be innovative with technological development. However, it makes no sense whatever to remove or generalise programs when, in a highly complex and complicated world, people need more thought-provoking, challenging, analytical programs that take listeners to places we've not previously been.

As a former broadcaster of the Media Report, Andrew Dodd, so succinctly put it "...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". Some of us simply prefer to take in our ideas via the more immediate, intimate medium of radio, then if necessary go to the program online or download it to podcast. We just don't want to spend our days sitting in front of the computer. This goes for many of the younger audience also.

So Ms Cassidy, here's the message for ABC management: give us back our high quality, specialist programs - on air.

Yours sincerely,  
Adrienne Shilling

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ABC  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation  
Radio and Regional Content  
ABC Ultimo Centre  
700 Harris Street  
Ultimo NSW 2007  
16 March 2009

Dear Ms Shilling,

Thank you for your email of 11 February to Lisa Taylor following up a response to an earlier contact of 23 October to Director of Radio Sue Howard, who has since left the ABC. According to our records, the ABC received another contact from you about the changes to the Radio National schedule in 2009. Sue Howard's office had forwarded your letter through to Radio National with the intention that a single response be sent to you on behalf of the ABC. Regrettably, it appears that a response was not forwarded and for this I apologise sincerely and will now attempt to address your concerns including those from your original letter.

In your letter of 23 October you raised two major issues of concern - treatment of Stephen Crittenden, and the decommissioning of The Religion Report. In relation to the first, while I understand that you have concerns about the treatment of Stephen Crittenden, this matter was the subject of an internal investigation under which the parties were bound by confidentiality. While the ABC cannot provide any specifics on the matter, I can confirm that Stephen Crittenden has returned to work in Radio National.

While we regret that you are unhappy with the decommissioning of The Religion Report, we feel that these changes meet the needs of the majority of our audience. As I trust you can understand, with such a diversity of interests and tastes, it is impossible to meet the expectations of all of our audience all of the time.

The changes to the 2009 schedule were not made lightly and involved considerable discussion within the Radio National network, taking into account audience feedback and needs gathered over some time. We understand that change can be difficult for audiences but genuinely believe that the Radio National schedule in 2009 retains the fundamental foundation of the network to deliver exceptional quality and distinctive content to its diverse audience. As you know, the network has a strong and passionate following and it must evolve to meet their different needs.

We acknowledge that there has been concern about these changes. The changes have become necessary as ABC Radio National looks to the future to ensure that its radio line-up is focused not just on traditional content genres but on contemporary intellectual discourse in Australia and worldwide. The changes in 2009 aim to refresh and revitalise Radio National's programming by offering new and more relevant programs to its audience. Specifically, this includes a new report on Thursdays called Future Tense, which analyses trends and predictions arising from changes across science, religion, art, economics and technology.

The ABC has recognised for some time the need for more original content relating to religion on ABC Online. The limited amount of content relating to the impact of religion and beliefs on contemporary Australian society that has been included on the ABC's "Unleashed" site has received a very positive responses from audiences. Radio National is keen to develop more content relating to religion in this area and a new online site providing a gateway for all religious content on the ABC is under development.

We are confident that these changes will make Radio National's distinctive,

high-quality content available to a burgeoning online audience - an audience which is identical to Radio National's listeners in wanting to make sense of the world and broaden their experience with trusted, thought provoking and sometimes risky content. However, this new audience's interaction with media is much more likely to be via the internet and to reach them Radio

National must improve its online presence, ensuring that this audience's bandwidth is as richly populated as Radio National's airwaves.

The changes in 2009 which commenced in late January are enabling Radio National to carry specialist coverage into the online space including improved radio feature materials, arts content and religion.

Again, I would like to apologise that

you did not receive a response to your concerns earlier.

I do hope that you continue to tune in to ABC Radio National, and the enjoy the rich diversity of content we have on offer.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Cassidy

Head National Networks 

**UPDATE reproduces the following three open letters from Dr. Peter Pockley to Mark Scott so that the membership is aware of the lengths to which some were prepared to go in order to engage ABC management in some kind of dialogue regarding the changes to Radio National programming. Unfortunately, the reply received from Mark Scott to one of Dr. Pockley's letter was not for general publication.**

7 December 2008

An Open Letter to:  
Mr Mark Scott  
Managing Director ABC

Dear Mr Scott,

### **REVERSING MAJOR CHANGES TO ABC RADIO NATIONAL**

As a key authority established for the public good, the ABC should be welcoming the copious evidence from a flood of direct submissions and a continuing stream of items in other public media that the Radio National network has a significant and diverse body prepared to declare their support for the network as it is. The ABC continues to encourage members of its audience to "Have Your Say!" but this call has a hollow ring for as long as there is no indication from "management" that the slightest notice has been taken of the calls for reversal of the clearly misguided decision to axe nine programs from the 2009 schedule.

### **Welcoming Support**

It will be a national tragedy if these changes and the outright rejection of the flood of calls for reversal were to

blacken your history as Editor-in-Chief of ABC programs. Failure to do so would compromise your pitch to government for providing substantial increases in triennial funding, following the ideology-driven attacks on the ABC from the former government, beginning with its punitive strike in its first (1996) Budget. The ABC is still suffering from this. You should be welcoming and harnessing, not rejecting, the enthusiastic support for RN's specialist programs.

### **Responding to the Issues**

I urge you to take a realistic second look at the "form letters" which have been sent over your name and those of middle "managers" to complainants. These letters (virtually identical between "authors" and hence the work of internal memo-writers) simply fail to address the deep issues raised by correspondents and in media coverage. All we have is an anodyne news release confirming the changes, citing not a shred of evidence that your managers had carefully surveyed the current audiences and contributors to the specialist programs being axed.

### **Losing Great Programs and Presenters**

These programs have added lustre and variety to such a gem of a timeslot as 8.30 – 9.00 am weekdays. From any survey you could only conclude that a significant section of your erstwhile support would be outraged. As senior manager, you should be ashamed of the pathetic standards of middle managers in the manner of their abrupt announcement of the changes to the staff affected and to the public.

There has been not a word of appreciation, commendation or congratulations to the outgoing

presenters and producers for the clearly outstanding jobs they have done for the ABC and their national audiences over the years. For example, it sticks out that none of the form letters or public statements makes any mention of Mr Stephen Crittenden, an original, thoughtful and exceptionally well-informed interviewer. If this failure has been on legal advice, then you should state as much.

### **Significant Critics**

It is clear that you have been poorly let down by the entirely predictable reaction from audiences and representative bodies (e.g. the collective Catholic Bishops and the Anglican Primate with regard to the axing of The Religion Report). If you did have any prior support for the changes (e.g. persistent complaints about program content) you should be declaring these openly, together with any remedial action you may have instituted with the staff members concerned.

While the axing of "The Religion Report" attracted much of the first burst of criticism, the equivalent fates of "The Media Report", "The Sports Factor", "In Conversation" and others have escalated the issues into broader issues of support for specialised units and programs.

### **Critiques Demanding Answers**

I now draw your attention to some of the major analyses and critiques of the issues raised by your decisions over RN's schedule for 2009. Each of these warranted a comprehensive response from the ABC, but the silence from your organisation is giving the impression that either you have nothing to say or you have decided to hunker down in hope that "it will all go away".

- “Update” newsletter of Friends of the ABC (NSW), December 2008: “Aunty gets it wrong again – badly”, 18 pages of criticism from Friends and much of what has appeared in mainstream press.
- Paul Collins, former specialist editor, Religion, ABC: “God Help us!”, Crikey, 15 October.
- Andrew Dodd, Founding presenter of The Media Report: “The dumbing down of Radio National” [On The Media Report]; Crikey, 16 October.
- Senate questions ABC axing of Religion Report; Hansard, 16 October.
- Kelly Burke: “ABC radio cuts draw a religious sermon”; Sydney Morning Herald, 22 October.
- Peter Pockley, Founding Head of ABC Science Unit: “ABC needs vigorous discussions, not web offerings”; “First Word” letter, Sydney Morning Herald, 23 October.
- Jill Greenwell, “Radio National Under Threat”, Update (FABC NSW); December
- Robert Manne: “New Teeth for Aunty – Reinvigorating the National Broadcaster”; Talk to Friends of the ABC, The Monthly magazine, December 2007 – January 2008.
- Media Watch, ABC TV, 27 October.
- Christopher Pearson: “Pray for sense to prevail”, The Weekend Australian, 25 October.
- Stephen Matchett: “Radio National’s downshift hits the fans where it hurts”, The Australian, 22 October.
- Caroline Chambers: “The Internet Killed the Radio Star”, New Matilda, 2 October.
- John Carmody: “Rescue our ABC from postmodernist clutches”; The Australian, 19 November.
- Frank Campbell: “On the diminution of critical public culture”, Review, The Weekend Australian, 29-30 November.
- Errol Simper: “Mixed views on ABC’s program reshuffle”, Media, The Australian 1 December.

Every one of these contributions warrants a fully detailed response in public or the ABC will be seen as yet another “corporate” which has muffled its ears, blindfolded its eyes and closed its doors.

Yours sincerely,  
 Dr Peter Pockley  
 Science Writer & Broadcaster  
 (Founding Head of ABC Science Unit)

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18 January 2009

Dear Mr Scott,

### **REVERSING MAJOR CHANGES TO ABC RADIO NATIONAL**

The letter to the editor of yesterday’s *Weekend Australian* by Dr John Carmody prompts me to write and repeat my encouragement of ABC leadership to engage seriously and publicly in the debate about quality, content and specialised broadcasters on Radio National and ABC TV. I am disappointed that, as Editor-in-Chief of ABC programs, you have not replied yourself to my first Open Letter of 7 December 2008 (summarised in my letter to the *Australian Financial Review*, 16 December).

Instead, I received a letter from Ms Sue Howard, Director of Radio, dated 19 December 2008 (but postmarked 30 December) in one of her last jobs before she was seen off the ABC on the date of her letter. It would thus be futile to reply to Ms Howard even though she was penultimately responsible for the changes to Radio National’s line-up for 2009 which drew such a massive reaction from audiences, commentators and politicians. In my letter to you I referred to the wide range of criticisms on major issues raised by ABC management’s decisions and the manner of their implementation that have appeared in mainstream media and which, at the time, had received precisely no answers.

Ms Howard’s letter continues that vacuum of public engagement and, in her unconvincing defence of the changes, offers not a scrap of evidence or external support for making the cuts. The responsibility for responding fully and publicly to the criticisms now bounces back to you. Please refer to my letter to the editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* nearly three months ago (23 October) and all of the other published reports, commentaries and editorials which I

cited in my Open Letter – and more.

My headline to this and the first Open Letter remains imperative. This coming week sees the last of the summer repeats of three 8.30 am programs which are being axed. Radio is a fast and flexible medium and, with Ms Howard gone, it is entirely within your capabilities to reverse the cuts, a move which would win wide plaudits for responsiveness to the ABC’s erstwhile supportive communities.

Finally and most important for the ABC’s credibility in this and related matters (as urged in my *SMH* Letter), it is incumbent on you to release publicly the report of the “investigation” into Mr Stephen Crittenden and his role in the Radio National controversy which Ms Howard passes off as “confidential”. If kept under wraps, this over-long exercise will be branded as a managerial cover-up.

Yours sincerely,  
 Dr Peter Pockley

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27 January 2009

Dear Mr Scott,

### **ENGAGING ABC CRITICS IN PUBLIC**

I acknowledge your letter dated 22 January in response to my second Open Letter to you of 18 January. (You do not mention my longer first Open Letter of 7 December 2008.) I appreciate your generous opening remark about my background and service to the ABC.

I note your restriction that your letter is “not for further distribution or publication” and I shall adhere to this. In this letter I shall only refer to key aspects of the Radio National controversy that are missing from your letter and the letter of 19 December from the Director of Radio, Ms Sue Howard, who had been responsible for the program changes but left the ABC on that day.

First, as an ABC supporter it is disappointing that you have missed the overall purpose of my first two letters where I urged you and other ABC managers to “come out” and engage widely in public debate over the program closures. Long before

today, the eve of the changes being implemented this week, it should have been imperative for managers to address specifically the various criticisms in the public media. I gave you 15 diverse references in my letter of 7 December and refrained from adding comments of my own on these items. The ABC's credibility is at stake in being responsive to the listening public in general, to RN listeners in particular and to public officials. I am far from a lone voice of concern that this credibility should not be compromised by silence from the ABC while you are negotiating for major increases in the triennial budget (refer to the Senate resolution of 16 October and the published Questions on Notice in Senate Estimates last October and answers).

Secondly and like Ms Howard, you have failed to fill the public vacuum of evidence supporting the closures since they were revealed in October. Sure, program changes are necessary from time to time for various reasons but these should never be unexplained "changes for change's sake".

Thirdly, there is no indication in Ms Howard's or your letters that ABC program managers had undertaken any demonstrable sounding of key national bodies with obvious stakes in continuity of the specialised programs. The history of the ABC's relations with them should have been well-studied by the managers. They would then have realised that both Religion and Science (whether designated "Department" or "Unit")

were established with strong external supporters (Religion in the 1940s and Science's first appointment in 1964) and they warranted respect. In balance, the specialist broadcasters had ensured professional independence from the representative bodies. Your lack of mention indicates there were no consultations. Unsurprisingly after the shock of the announcements, representative bodies have requested reversals but to no avail, while the outstanding, axed program-makers like Stephen Crittenden have earned no internal or public praise from management.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Peter Pockley



## The Pay-TV Sharks are circling

**Another question for our political leaders. Do we REALLY want Rupert Murdoch running our international television network (currently operated by the ABC), and assaulting our children with an avalanche of advertising for junk food through a children's channel.**

**That is what Sky News would like, and is lobbying heavily in Canberra to get.**

Tensions have ignited between the ABC and Sky News, with ABC managing director Mark Scott suggesting pay-TV's push to operate Australia's international television network could harm diplomatic relations.

Mr Scott's comments follow remarks by Sky News chief executive Angelos Frangopoulos at a broadcasting conference yesterday, when he said Sky would re-tender to provide the Australia Network TV service next year when the current contract with the ABC expires.

Sky lost out to the ABC in 2005 in its bid to operate the channel, which is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

"We plan to contest again and we believe it is the best way for government to get best value for taxpayers and for DFAT, regardless of who wins," Mr Frangopoulos said.

The Australia Network aims to promote the nation's interests internationally.

Defending the ABC's role, Mr Scott told The Australian last night there had been "significant growth in investment by governments around the world in broadcasting as part of their diplomatic activity, and it's being delivered by the public broadcasters".

"There is an agreed understanding that you can't outsource your diplomatic activities, and you can't outsource it to Rupert Murdoch's international operations," he said.

(Sky News is one-third owned by British pay-TV group BSkyB, which is in turn 39 per cent owned by News Corporation, the owner of The Australian.)

"We strongly believe the Australian Government's diplomatic efforts in broadcasting need to be delivered by

the Australian Government's public broadcaster," Mr Scott said.

He said the ABC was the only media group in Australia with a dedicated Asia-Pacific newsroom, staffed with 60 people.

However, Mr Frangopoulos called for open tenders for all new government services, such as new television channels.

The ABC is seeking extra government funding to provide a free-to-air news and public affairs channel and a children's channel. The outcome will be revealed in the May budget.

Mr Frangopoulos argued that the pay-TV industry could tender for the children's channel, but Mr Scott rejected the idea.

"One of the reasons our proposal has so much support is because it's not being offered by the people that are doing subscription TV," he said.

"We are commercial-free, are not driven by profit, we will have an intensive amount of Australian content, and it will be delivered by the most trusted brand on Australian TV."

But Mr Frangopoulos said the pay-TV sector was "arguably better-placed than the ABC to provide a new free-to-air children's channel".

Mr Scott said the public affairs and children's channels proposed by the ABC were not comparable to others.

The Australian

# The price of creative independence at the ABC

Quentin Dempster

**Quentin Dempster has worked at the ABC for 20 years. He currently hosts NSW Stateline. In 2002 he won the Walkley Award for Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism. He is the author of Death Struggle: How political malice and boardroom powerplays are killing the ABC. He is currently 'Staff-elected director in exile.**



There has been a tendency by some to see the recent controversial changes to Radio National as a symptom of the broadcaster being pulled in two different directions: traditional quality broadcasting on one hand, and the digital revolution on the other. The truth is a little more complicated, but perhaps also a bit more hopeful.

The digital revolution has been extraordinarily good for the ABC, but this success has been heavily dependant on the quality of the product that the broadcaster is known for. In the critical couple of years ahead, the organisation needs to consolidate and expand its content and keep innovating to keep its position as a leader in digital media.

The digital revolution and the uncertain future of journalism in commercial television, (and particularly in mass circulation newspapers), demonstrate both the opportunity and the need for the enhancement of the ABC as a mainstream player in Australian media and culture.

The ABC has now delivered its 2009-2012 triennial funding submission to the Rudd Government. So far, no funding invoice has been publicly attached to that submission. The ABC

has grand plans for education, public affairs and children's free-to-air television multi-channels and innovative broadband content.

With the Labor Government professing its support for public broadcasting through its current call for public submissions on its digital future, there is an expectation that extra operational base funding will be delivered, possibly as early as the May budget next year.

This is to be hoped for, because unless additional taxpayer funding is secured the ABC will have to cut services and pressure will rebuild from within for the broadcaster to take advertising. It's hard to exaggerate how serious a step that would be. The overarching philosophy of public service broadcasting is that it exists to inform, educate and entertain a polity,

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**The power of the scheduler is over. Programs can go online for fast broadband internet audio and video streaming before they are broadcast on radio or TV.**

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engaging audiences as citizens in a robust democracy, not as consumers to be delivered up to advertisers.

In the last decade new digital broadcast and broadband internet technology has saved the ABC. The ABC has been leading the media industry through its own digital transformation, demonstrating its value-adding capability by taking a place at the cutting edge of new delivery systems with pod casting and vod casting, internet TV and its content-laden ABC online portal. Audiences have been flocking to the new services, even as radio and TV audiences are at record levels as well.

The new delivery systems have given

the broadcaster a cost-effective lease of new life, and a new relevance and worth to ABC-copyright TV and radio news and current affairs, Radio National specialist programs and innovative broadband content. People are commenting on, blogging about and engaging with programs as never before.

Audiences, particularly tech-savvy youngsters, can now click on Triple J, RN, Four Corners broadband editions, The 7.30 Report, The Chaser and Summer Heights High among hundreds of other programs whenever they want to.

The power of the scheduler is over. Programs can go online for fast broadband internet audio and video streaming before they are broadcast on radio or TV. Broadcasting is morphing into cybercasting.

As well, the ABC's free-to-air (FTA) digital multi-channels will help to drive the take-up of digital set top boxes by Australian households to enable the analogue transmission to be switched off by 2013. FTA multi-channels can deliver almost limitless content for less than \$100 for a set-top box. FTA digital radio is coming next year too, and the ABC will be there.

But while it is vitally important to exploit digital broadcast and cybercast technologies so that all the content produced at taxpayers' expense is readily and freely accessible, the real debate about the ABC's future should be about enhancing the quality of that content.

The recent dispute over the axing of some specialist programs at 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 network's website" has helped to bring some focus to this multi-faceted debate.

RN programs that are broadcast on radio attract the over 50s audience while RN online audiences are under 50. To reallocate scarce resources at the

expense of one loyal section of the audience to build another does not appear to be an ideal way to make such a transition. The ABC should have the capacity to deliver to both over the transitional period.

After more than 2000 emails and letters of complaint, the ABC has reassured audiences that the loss of RN programs, in particular The Religion Report, does not mean it is deserting these speciality areas. Programs like The Religion Report enjoy a strong following. Its associated website is now accessed internationally, establishing the show as a valuable "brand" in its own right.

While no doubt noting the ABC's assurances, those complaining (representing a wide range of political perspectives, and including Christopher Pearson and Senator Bob Brown) have yet to see what will replace The Religion Report. At the moment they just have to take the ABC's word for it that it will somehow maintain and enhance the quality and depth of its religious coverage on radio, television or online.

ABC broadcasters accept that management has the right to manage as it fairly sees fit, including re-assigning program makers and trying new program ideas and formats. Ideally this should be done with audience sensitivity, collegial care, consultation and human understanding for those committed to a speciality which has taken years to develop.

But what seems to be at issue here is the future of specialist units which have characterised Radio National from its beginning. These specialist units and the funding which has sustained them over decades have helped to build the ABC's in-house knowledge base, creating household names out of Robyn Williams and Norman Swan in science, for example, and Antony Green, who represents the enormous value of a 20-year investment in a speciality area. It is revealing that leaders of ABC Radio talk about a commitment to specialisation but rarely acknowledge it is the specialist units which build authority, interpretative and analytical depth over time.

This is where the ABC management needs to recognise that platform

innovation and content quality are both crucial to its success. Podcasting has demonstrated the worth and value of specialist units as audiences go out of their way to download the programs they produce. Up to September this year, RN's monthly average podcast downloads reached 1.7 million, half of the ABC's overall average of 3.37 million. The downloads have gone global, with the ABC gaining an international reputation for the distinctiveness and strength of its specialist units: health, science, media, religion, law, literature and the arts.

Arguably we need more specialisation in environment and population, sustainability and economics, technology, education, law and justice and foreign policy. Podcasting (and eventually vodcasting) demonstrates that specialisation is a major part of the future for ABC content. Audiences here and around the world are hungry for quality programming.

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**In the interests of  
transparency the ABC  
should publish in its annual  
report to Parliament all  
commercial contracts and  
negotiated obligations to  
subscription television.**

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And it's not as if we're talking about big money here. ABC specialist broadcasters work on minimal funding. For example, The Religion Report operates on an annual budget of around \$200,000 for salaries, technical production, research and (almost non-existent) travel.

Radio National's entire network annual promotional budget is negligible. RN audiences are loyal and stay for years. Podcasting is building a new, younger audience. Imagine the black bemusement among specialist broadcasters when they see the ABC willing to spend \$6 million to re-sign The Chaser on ABC TV for just one year after a bidding war with the commercial stations. Good luck to the clever Chaser boys but the ABC needs to be sensitive to the comparisons of value which inevitably arise.

Quality is clearly crucial to the ABC's future, but that quality in turn relies very heavily on securing the ABC's creative independence. And that's something that can only be done with adequate public funding.

In the crunch over dollars in the last 20 years the ABC has had to compromise its independence by becoming reliant on external fund providers for its first-release Australian drama and documentary content, depending on bodies like government film finance commissions, lotteries trusts, government departments and tax concession investors. The ABC no longer has in-house drama and documentary departments or a natural history unit.

Cuts have been made everywhere, and they are cuts you notice. To maintain the viability of its TV schedule ABC TV has become "UK TV", dependant on shelf programs acquired from Britain. Depressed insiders say, "So much for our Charter obligation to 'enhance a sense of national identity'."

While in the 2007 budget the Howard government provided \$30 million over three years for the ABC to commission drama from the private TV production sector, further compromise was apparent when some of these new dramas quickly appeared on pay TV's Hallmark Channel. In the interests of transparency the ABC should publish in its annual report to Parliament all commercial contracts and negotiated obligations to subscription television. The ABC does not exist to make soapy dramas for the Hallmark Channel.

The obvious concern here is that if these arrangements prevail into the future, dramas will be commissioned by the ABC and its external investors ultimately because they are commercially bankable and not because they are good or creative risk-taking ideas. Such arrangements would be a distortion of the ABC's public purpose.

Another link in the chain of quality through creative independence is the ability to train and retain the people who make the service work. This practice of building skills within the organisation has been another casualty of chronic under-funding, and there are now those inside the ABC who say the broadcaster cannot afford to be a

training campus for television and broadcast production. On the contrary, having a capacity to make and exploit its own programs and develop the talent necessary to do so is surely fundamental to creative independence.

To avoid misunderstanding, the ABC's role as a mentor and developer of creative talent and skills (technical, writing, production and journalism) should be stated explicitly in the ABC Act.

So how much additional funding would be needed to secure the ABC's creative independence? Channels Nine, Seven and Ten spend around \$40 million to \$60 million each a year on their legislated Australian drama content quotas. At the very least that should be matched for the ABC as a component part of its annual appropriation.

Plus, it's going to be a time of necessary investment in this area.

With the ABC's other plans to help drive the digital revolution in Australia, an annual operational base funding increase of \$150 million to \$200 million recurrent would be a good start. This is a small investment, and it would be coming at a time when it's sure to pay us back handsomely.

*Wildlife filmmaker David Parrer's Land of the Parrots was the last production of the Natural History Unit.* 

## NSW FRIENDS of the ABC

# Submission to Federal Government Review into ABC and SBS

### 1. The ABC's Charter

The Charter has served the ABC well for over 70 years, but the erosion of funding to the ABC, particularly over the last 20 years, has made it virtually impossible for the ABC to continue to offer a "comprehensive broadcasting service" which caters for every Australian of every age in every location (which surely is the ideal). The ABC must continue to inform, to educate and to entertain, not just within the borders of Australia but throughout Asia as well (our region.)

The Charter should stress the concept of 'excellence in broadcasting' regardless of medium (radio, TV, internet), modality (digital, multi-channel) or message. The ABC should be mandated to aim for the highest possible standards.

The Charter should be strengthened to emphasise its independence from political and commercial influences. Regardless of medium, modality or message, the ABC must remain free of advertising or sponsorship, and must always be at arms length from government and political entities.

The AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING ACT 1983 should be amended to read:

Subsection (1) "The Corporation shall not attach advertisements or permit others to attach advertisements to any content broadcast or transmitted online or by any current or future medium of communication."

Subsections (2) and (3), the word

"broadcasting" be altered to read "transmitted by any current or future medium."

### 2. Funding

If we accept 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," we must also accept that the Australian community and government must be prepared to pay a lot more for that public broadcaster. In 2004/5, the BBC, a comparable broadcaster, received \$107 per person in the UK whilst the ABC received \$41.40 per person in Australia. The ABC budget of \$827 million (ABC TV and 5 radio networks) was substantially smaller than that of the smallest of the commercial TV networks, which are not national networks.

The ABC cannot fulfil its charter (see above) on its current level of funding, particularly in relation to the required levels of excellence. Funding has been eroding since 1986, with both major parties, when in government, failing to keep ABC funding in line with inflation. Australian-produced drama on ABC TV is a small fraction of 20 years ago. Outsourcing has become a necessity as the ABC has lost the capacity and infrastructure to make in-house productions. It is now 4 years since the KPMG Audit, initiated by the Howard Government but never released, recommended an immediate

10% increase in funding if the ABC was to be able to maintain existing levels of production.

By any of these measures, the ABC is grossly under-funded. We request an immediate 25% increase in ABC funding, and an immediate review of its capacity to both maintain existing operations and grow into the future, as the new challenges of the digital world are taken up.

### 3. The ABC and the Education Revolution

Within the context of excellent Australian content the ABC has a critical role in the education of all Australians. It must foster critical thinking, encourage listeners and viewers to identify and question assumptions, consider and weigh competing points of view and raise and argue for issues that they think are important. At the same time, the ABC must enhance children's and adults' knowledge, understanding and appreciation of cultural and intellectual topics and modes of human expression. More opportunities must be provided for the development of articulate expression through all of the performing and creative arts. Funding constraints have greatly diminished the capacity of the ABC to maintain involvement in these areas that it has had in the past.

Throughout its history the ABC has led the world in programs for children

on radio and television, programs which have educated, entertained and expanded young minds. This leadership must not be abandoned through lack of resources. A digital channel for children is ready to be launched, but the ABC has been denied the funds to do so. This must be addressed in new budgeting considerations.

#### 4. Creative Australian Content.

The ABC should be the proud vehicle for the expression of Australian culture in all its many facets, and the main medium through which the Australian story is told. It is also a function of the ABC to reflect Australia's cultural diversity, and to celebrate that diversity. Again, the funds must be provided to enable the ABC to do this and to provide opportunities for creative artists from all areas to have many more opportunities than are currently

provided. Unfortunately the ABC has, through funding constraints, had to retreat significantly from its past commitment to giving a platform to Australian voices.

It remains an anomaly that the local content provisions for commercial television do not apply to the ABC. This must be addressed.

#### 5. Radio National

Radio National should represent the epitome of excellence, high standards and intellectual challenge, catering for those sections of the community that value and appreciate such offerings. It should be unapologetically elitist in the same way that a society's universities should be elitist. It will appeal to and be listened to by a minority of the community – there is nothing wrong with that, as there are plenty of other avenues within the ABC for those who want material that is less “meaty.”

Radio National, in line with stated

objectives, provides thought-provoking content that enriches society. Every society and every section of society requires elitists to encourage creative endeavour and the development of new talent. In-depth debate on issues, both national and international, is essential to freedom of speech in any society, and the public airing of those debates in a non-partisan way is a vital function of Radio National.

Radio National must continue to provide the mechanism through which to air controversial issues and unpopular views, including the policies of an incumbent government, without the accusations of bias to which we have become sadly accustomed in Australia. The freedom of any society will be rightly judged by the opportunities afforded within that society for the public expression of alternative views to the so-called “mainstream.” Radio National provides that forum, and must be provided with the resources to continue to do so.



## Personal submission to ABC/SBS Review from Quentin Dempster, Staff-Elected Director in Exile

**Priority One: Creative Independence**

**Priority Two: Sustainable non-commercial funding**

**Priority Three: Quality and specialist content**

**Priority Four: Education, skills training and language services**

The digital revolution presents the Australian public with an exceptional opportunity to build the public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) into even more valuable institutional forces strengthening this country's cultural, educational and democratic engagement.

Digital free-to-air (FTA) television multi-channelling, broadband internet and, from 2009, digital radio will enable both the ABC and SBS to cost-effectively extend the use of and access to current content and, if adequately funded, to create and invent new forms of content and engagement.

The power of the scheduler is over.

Programs can go online for fast broadband internet audio and video streaming before they are broadcast on radio or TV.

Broadcasting is morphing into cybercasting.

#### Education

To build the nation, education, skills training and language services stand out as the greatest public need. The digital revolution provides the technological opportunity.

The ABC's existing and still undelivered Charter obligation on education can at last be achieved through the limitless capacity of cyberspace and the broadcaster's digitised archive of programming. The ABC can lead the world in this field on FTA multi-channel TV and broadband internet websites for primary, secondary, tertiary and technical education plus life-long learning. The ABC, in co-operation with educators, can become a driving force in the nation's education and training.

For SBS, there is potential for a new lease of relevance and worth after the unpleasantness of its recent crass commercialism. With the current migration rate at 150,000 or more souls a year, Australia is not going to become a monoculture any time soon.

Immigrants from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Pacific will not know instinctively that Don Bradman was our greatest tennis player. For this reason an opportunity exists for SBS to enhance its English and other language services - a perfect fit for multi-channelling on FTA TV with associated websites. There would be broad political support given the obvious multicultural inclusion and cohesive benefits, for which SBS was first established.

#### Sustainable, non-commercial public funding

There are issues I hope this review can resolve about the strategic direction of public broadcasting in Australia after many years of contentious dispute.

The main one is commerciality.

The overarching philosophy of public service broadcasting (now cybercasting) is that it exists to inform, educate and entertain a polity, engaging audiences as citizens in a robust democracy, not as consumers to be delivered up to advertisers.

I regret to report that through public funding deprivation over the last 20

years the ABC and SBS have blotted their copy books in this regard.

The SBS board's casuistic legal advice allowing advertising in 'natural breaks' exposed the determination of the SBS Board to turn the broadcaster into Australia's fourth commercial TV channel. Advertising revenues so derived were to be laundered into original Australian programming ie. a worthwhile compromise. But in the process of commerciality the SBS audience has felt cheated, distrustful and has switched off. This is an undesirable outcome for a taxpayer-funded service and should be confronted and repaired by government in its funding appropriation to SBS.

The ABC also has been affected by commerciality. The ABC Board's 2008 decision to restructure ABC Enterprises (ABC shops and centres) and rename the division ABC Commercial, exposed a more aggressive tactic to commission and monetise 'product' and to exploit the so called ABC 'brand'. Once passive 'announcements' of ABC shop activities on ABC TV and radio are turning into a harder sell with some nincompoops in ABC Commercial wanting to flash prices of products, like a discount retailer. This is a recipe for the destruction of audience trust in the ABC. The ABC wave-form logo has been colourised for signage on promotions and shop fronts. To me it looked like the once trusted ABC logo had been infected with some form of meningococcal virus. Although the ABC has declared that it will not take advertising on its ABC Online websites, there remains this very prospect if the board and management consider additional funding is not forthcoming.

The issue should be put beyond doubt through an amendment to the ABC Act extending the current Act's TV and radio advertising prohibition to all ABC online and other services. In any event, a taxpayer subsidised media organisation like the ABC should not be allowed to compete for advertising revenues now desperately needed by commercial media entities and private sector entrepreneurs trying to build digital and broadband products and services. Public broadcasting exists to complement the commercial media sector, not compete against it for advertising.

## Quality

The enormous growth of podcasting of ABC specialist programs has revealed the future lies in more specialisation, not less. Podcasting is building a new, younger audience. Specialist units in Radio

National have helped to build the ABC's in-house knowledge base, creating household names out of Robyn Williams and Norman Swan in science, for example. Antony Green, the ABC's psephologist, represents a 20 year investment in building a specialty in Australia's state, federal and territory electoral systems. Antony's websites and analysis used across platforms demonstrate that specialisation makes the ABC valuable, useful and distinctive. Although ABC managers often talk about a commitment to specialisation, they rarely acknowledge that it is the specialist units which build authority, interpretative and analytical depth over time.

Podcasting has demonstrated the worth and value of specialist units as audiences go out of their way to download the programs they produce. Up to September this year (2008), Radio National's average podcast downloads reached 1.7million, half of the ABC's overall average of 3.37 million. The downloads have gone global, with the ABC gaining an international reputation for the distinctiveness and strength of its specialist units – health, science, media, religion, law, investigative journalism, literature and the arts.

Arguably we need more specialisation in environment and population, sustainability and economics, technology, planning, education, law and justice and foreign policy. Podcasting (and eventually vodcasting) demonstrates that specialisation is a major part of the future for ABC content. Audiences here and around the world are hungry for quality programming.

## Creative independence

Quality is clearly crucial to the ABC's future and that quality in turn relies very heavily on securing the ABC's creative independence. And that's something that can only be done with adequate public funding.

In the crunch over dollars in the last 20 years the ABC has had to compromise its independence by becoming reliant on external fund providers for its first-release Australian drama and documentary content, depending on bodies like government film finance commissions, lotteries trusts, government departments and tax concession investors. The ABC no longer has in-house drama and documentary departments or a natural history unit.

Cuts have been made everywhere, and they are cuts you notice. To maintain the viability of its prime time TV

schedule ABC TV has become "UK TV", dependant on shelf programs acquired from Britain. Depressed insiders say, "So much for our Charter obligation to 'enhance a sense of national identity'."

While in the 2007 budget the Howard government provided \$30million over three years for the ABC to commission drama from the private TV production sector, further compromise was apparent when some of these new dramas quickly appeared on pay TV's Hallmark channel. In the interests of transparency the ABC should publish in its annual report to Parliament all commercial contracts and negotiated obligations to subscription television. The ABC does not exist to make soapy dramas for the Hallmark Channel. The obvious concern here is that if these arrangements prevail into the future, dramas will be commissioned by the ABC and its external investors ultimately because they are commercially bankable and not because they are good or creative, risk-taking ideas. Such arrangements would be a distortion of the ABC's public purpose.

Another link in the chain of quality through creative independence is the ability to train and retain the people who make the service work. This practice of building skills within the organisation has been another casualty of chronic underfunding, and there are now those inside the ABC who say the broadcaster cannot afford to be a training campus for television and broadcaster production. On the contrary, having a capacity to make and exploit its own programs and develop the talent and skills necessary to do so is surely fundamental to creative independence.

To avoid misunderstanding, the ABC's role as a mentor and developer of creative talent and skills (technical, writing, production and journalism) should be stated explicitly in the ABC Act.

## Conclusion

This review of the ABC and SBS in the context of the digital revolution is timely. As the world redefines consumer capitalism and confronts environmental sustainability through global atmospheric warming, a nation's capacity to engage its people in the clash of ideas will be crucial. Digital technology is exceptional as a tool of communication, cultural and political engagement, information and education. Given the enormous challenges faced by the world Australia wants to play a major role in the paradigm shift to environmental and economic sustainability. To help take this role, Australia needs a creative and independent public broadcasting system now more than ever. 

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**National Web Portal**  
links to all State Branches.

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*The Treasurer, Friends of the ABC (NSW) Inc.  
PO Box 1391, North Sydney NSW 2059.*

**Use only if joining** or if your membership has expired.

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