



ON AIR

Newsletter of Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) Inc

INSIDE:

Letter to the Editor	-2-
Editors' Note	-2-
Correspondence with New ABC Chairman	-3-
Multicultural Festival Stall	-3-
A Bland and Mediocre ABC	-4-
Your Committee Members	-4-
FABC Declaration	-5/6-
Our Prominent Community Supporters	-6-

HOT TOPICS

Environment – there's no hotter topic right now. All types are discovering climate change and the bandwagon continues to gain speed. Christopher L. Watson from Latham asks the question why there isn't more Environment related programming on the ABC (see Letter to the Editor on page 2).

Any Difference? We flagged Difference of Opinion as a show to look out for back in December. After several weeks on air, what's your personal take? Is the show as biased/unbiased as other ABC programming? Confused? Send us your thoughts to editor@fabcact.org

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR...

Tour of ABC's Northbourne Studios - Thursday 26 April, 2.00 - 3.00 pm @ corner of Northbourne and Wakefield Avenue Dickson. Local ABC staff will take us around the studios and give us a glimpse of life behind the microphones and beyond the TV screens. Group size is limited to 25 so if you're interested, phone Jill Greenwell (6253 3531) or email her at president@fabcact.org

Bookings are essential, so do it now!

"Politics in the Pub" – Election fever is coming fast. So what better way to celebrate this than with an argument and an ale with old and new friends? Watch this space.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

It is very good news that at last Tuggeranong will no longer be in the dark as far as listening to Triple J and Classic FM goes. People in Tuggeranong will know that they cannot at present hear these two ABC radio networks because Mt. Taylor blocks the transmission from Black Mountain.

By about July, improvements to the transmission infrastructure at Tuggeranong Hill should not only provide coverage to new areas but they will also improve reception of these two services in other areas with patchy reception.

The announcement of this extended coverage was made jointly by the Minister for Communications, and by ACT Senator Gary Humphries who Senator Helen Coonan congratulated for his "dogged pursuit" of this matter over more than two years.

"My underlying argument to the Government was that the ABC is a national institution which should be accessible for all Australians. Canberrans, particularly, are great fans of ABC radio," Senator Humphries said.

Yes, Senator Humphries, we agree. Which brings me to another aspect of the ABC's accessibility - being free of charge.

The ABC recently announced that it will be looking into the potential for "new revenue streams afforded by digital technology", in other words making money by selling what is currently available free. At the moment, for example, it is possible to access last night's, last year's, or in some cases, last decade's programmes by searching the online archive for those programmes, both radio and television. If you can't hear or see them online you can at least read the transcript. Free. You can also do it by podcasting or vodcasting. Free. There is also the potential for the ABC to make money out of what has yet to be created in the new world of digitisation.

At its inception in 1932 the ABC was hailed as "a service that is not run for profit, but purely in the interests of every section of the community". It is consistent with that ideal that the ABC's innovative digital services enable more and more people to see and hear ABC programmes, at times and in places of their choice. Having created these services, however, it is contradictory for the ABC to turn around and charge for them. ■

Jill Greenwell

President ACT & Region

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A DROUGHT IN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMMING

With Climate warming and drought on our lips it's high time that Radio National reinstates the weekly half-hour time slot on environmental issues ("Earthbeat" was dropped early last year after a run of very many years).

We need to be well and reliably informed on all sorts of policy issues that underpin the very sustainability of our society – ranging from non-polluting energy sources, soil and water conservation, population levels, loss of animal and plant species, and so on. Also, interviews with the relevant politicians must be a priority, particularly in election years.

Of course, such a slot needs a good professional host of the calibre of Robyn Williams of the Science Show. The medico, Norman Swan, who hosts the Health Report is another prime example. In fact this environmental report must be given prime time, eg, on a weekday, say, at 8:30am. ■

Send your letters by mail to Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region), 48/77 Northbourne Ave Turner ACT 2612.

Alternatively by email to editor@fabact.org



EDITORS' NOTE

By Mark Notaras

Welcome to our first edition of On Air for 2007. Welcome also to the beginning of a critically important federal election campaign for our beloved ABC.

The circus rolls around the countryside every three years. Hopefully, this time the performers will be genuinely competitive. In this Chinese Year of the Pig, don't be surprised if the pork barrelling of audiences, the voters, reaches gargantuan proportions. Come October, we will perform our civic duty with a large degree of cynicism and most probably a snide remark that one Saturday of our year has been disrupted unnecessarily.

Correlating strongly with palpable political apathies is an indisputable systematic undermining of great Australian institutions such as the ABC by the incumbent federal government. Australian democracy has, to borrow a regrettable phrase, reached a tipping point. In the last decade, the Australian Public Service, the intelligence and defence apparatus, charities, academia, churches and even our national boundaries have also been bullied by a government addicted to power and obsessed with information manipulation.

These regressions are manifest in quantitative indicators such as per

capita funding and locally produced drama hours per year. We should not, however, be fooled into isolating debate to the details of financial aggregates - as if they alone dictate the quality of institutions that comprise a thriving democracy. A prerequisite for good public policy is a deep philosophical commitment to upholding the integrity and independence of such institutions. Here, actions speak louder than concocted words and inflated numbers. Con-



cealment of true motives becomes difficult when your heart only beats to the drum of the dollar and political opportunism.

The great strength of the Friends of the ABC is that we are focussed and united in our cause. We believe without question that a free, independent and accessible public broadcaster is at the core of a mature and vibrant democratic nation state. Yet, the Friends campaigning on our

passion in isolation will not suffice in achieving critical changes where they count – on Capital Hill. As a single issue lobby group however, we can take advantage of the fact that our agenda aligns well with other socially progressive lobby groups.

We work towards an ultimate outcome that we share with our sister and brother civil society groups in the welfare, environment and justice sectors among others. We seek through the ABC an improved society and strengthened democracy. We want a fair and open society where all Australians are respected with dignity and given a voice. A stronger ABC can only be more effective with a stronger public sector, academic institutions etc. As we drag ourselves to the ballot box in October, we will be wise to consider the impacts of a 5th Howard Government, not just on the ABC but also on the other institutions and organisations that ultimately work towards those same broader goals.

While many/most/all of us have broken our new year's resolutions, one promise we will keep is to work as hard as ever to put the future of the ABC on the radar in the 2007 federal election campaign. Your active support in this crunch year will be more valuable than ever. ■

Ed.

Correspondence with the New ABC Chairman

By Jill Greenwell

In January Maurice Newman took up his position as Chairman of the ABC, on the expiry of Donald McDonald's tenure. At the time of his appointment Mr. Newman was reported as saying that he had no agenda to introduce advertising to the ABC (Sydney Morning Herald, 15 December).

This was quite a heartening statement, which I drew upon when I wrote on behalf of the Friends of the ABC in the Canberra region to congratulate Mr Newman. In my letter I underlined the concern of Friends of the ABC "that the ABC's editorial independence should be quarantined from commercial influence just as from political interference".

I went on to say that "while it is good that in your view the May Budget outcome took 'the heat off any immediate need for additional funding', we Friends of the ABC consider that as a

matter of principle, the ABC should never take on advertising. I am sure you would agree that SBS's latest use of advertising within programmes is belittling its documentary productions and demeaning its artistic presentations.

However the most objectionable feature of advertising is not the diminished quality of particular programmes. It is the inevitable impact of the advertising dollar on the programming itself which erodes the commercial independence of the broadcaster."

I drew Mr. Newman's attention to the role of Friends of the ABC as having "begun as, and remained, a movement to press on politicians the obligation to sustain and respect the ABC, but if ever they sensed that the board or management were letting its audience down, they would be saying so..." (This description of us is by Ken Inglis in his latest book).

I then said that, "It is in the spirit of that history that I am bringing to your attention the ACT Branch's recent re-statement of our aims. In that document you will see that we have identified several qualities as essential to a public broadcaster. Independence is at the top of the list. The others are distinctiveness, accountability, and market share. We have gone on to specify what criteria we think necessary if the ABC is to measure up to these qualities. An ABC uncompromised by commercial influence is one of those criteria."

In his letter of reply Mr. Newman, among other things "commended your Branch's articulation of the essential qualities of an effective public broadcaster and its aims". He said that, "You may be assured I will dedicate myself to ensuring that the ABC is run with integrity and in the public interest, consistent with its charter".

We, of course, are among that public whose interest the ABC was established to serve. ■

Multicultural Festival Stall

By Jane Timbrell
Stall Co-ordinator

The FABC started the year off with a stall at the Contact Canberra Day in Garema Place on Sunday 11 February, as part of the 2007 Multicultural Festival .

We thank all our volunteers who were rostered onto the stall during the day for a job well done. Contact Day is a great opportunity for the Friends to raise our profile in Canberra along side other community based organisations. We have increased our range of merchandise and we can report that our "Bananas without Pyjamas" children's t-shirts are our best selling item. Our merchandise range will be expanded over the next few months!!



A BLAND AND MEDIOCRE ABC

By Jill Greenwell

At our AGM last year we passed a resolution about the possibly negative impact of the newly-announced editorial policies. As requested, I wrote to ABC management:

"Dear Mr. Scott,

At the recent Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) the following resolution was carried:

That this meeting

- 1) is gravely concerned that the recently announced changes to the ABC's editorial policies and the proposed appointment, for the first time, of a Director of Editorial Policy are likely to have the effect of making many ABC programs more bland and mediocre and its investigative journalism less systematic and enterprising,*
- 2) calls on the committee to convey this concern to the ABC Board."*

I gave Mr. Scott some of the reasons behind the resolution: scepticism as to the need for yet another review mechanism, fear that self-censorship and caution would be the effect of the new position, and disquiet that the Managing Director's stated aim "for further diversity of voices" could replace critical scrutiny with blandness

It was Murray Green, Director Corporate Strategy and Communications who replied on behalf of the Mark Scott.

He wrote, among other things that:

"Your support for the ABC is appreciated. However - with respect - concerns that you express in relation to the ABC's new Editorial Policies are misplaced"

There is no basis for concern about the ABC's commitment to fearless and rigorous journalism.....The new Editorial Policies also emphasise the requirement for journalists to be questioning, and to serve the public interest by investigating issues affecting society and individuals.

.....As for making ABC programs "more bland and mediocre", the new Editorial Policies introduce a new content category - Opinion - which is specifically designed to draw out strong, partisan and often controversial viewpoints.....

Finally, you particularly refer to criticism of the Managing Director's statement that under these new policies the ABC will be looking for further diversity of voices. It is difficult to understand the objection to this.".

I disagree with Mr. Green that our concerns are misplaced but am very happy that in his judgment there'll be no diminution in the ABC's fearless and rigorous journalism. I hope that I will never have cause to remind him of that reassurance.

If Mr. Green had difficulty last December in understanding our objection to the ABC's search for further diversity of voices, I wonder whether he has been helped by watching A Difference of Opinion? That programme was heralded by Mark Scott as one example of the ABC's further diversity, indeed one which "will ensure that on contentious issues of the day, there is opportunity for the full range of opinions and perspectives to be heard" (Mark Scott 16 October 2006).

What's your verdict? Critical scrutiny - or blandness? Let's hear from you!

"The most important role of the media is to question the truthfulness of governments."

Robert Manne, La Trobe University, SMH 2 June 2003

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WHY NOT CHECK IT
www.fabcact.org OUT

FABC Declaration - WHAT WE ARE FIGHTING FOR

WHY *PUBLIC* BROADCASTING ?

Only a public broadcaster can:

- ▶▶ Probe the powerful, critically analyse government, expose the secret
- ▶▶ Concentrate on quality, rather than deliver audiences to advertisers
- ▶▶ Create a sense of national culture
- ▶▶ Cater for the diversity of interests across the nation
- ▶▶ Foster creative endeavour in the community

“Non commercial television should address itself to the idea of excellence – not the idea of acceptability.”

Ruth Cracknell quoting (2001) submission to Carnegie TV Inquiry 1967

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES FOR AN EFFECTIVE PUBLIC BROADCASTER?

Independence, from political and commercial influences: freedom to

- ▶▶ **broadcast comprehensive** and accessible information so citizens can scrutinise the actions of the powerful and participate in decision-making
- ▶▶ **Accountability** to the public ultimately, via parliament, but also through accessible and transparent reporting and complaints procedures,
- ▶▶ **Distinctiveness** in creating high quality programming which caters for both minorities and the mainstream
- ▶▶ **Market share** sufficient users to justify public expenditure and to exert pressure on other broadcasters

Credible investigative journalism, imaginative and creative programming, take time. They require diligence, courage, integrity and independence, and adequate funding.

WHAT ARE FRIENDS OF THE ABC FIGHTING FOR?

A merit-based ABC Board appointment procedure

Maintaining the independence and integrity of the ABC is one of the duties of the ABC Board. For the Corporation to be at arms length from Government, the Board itself must be seen to be independent of Government. An open and transparent method of appointing the Board members, based on or similar to the Nolan Rules developed in the United Kingdom, should be implemented. The recently abolished position of staff elected director should be restored.

An ABC uncompromised by commercial influence

The ABC should also be independent of commercial influence. There is a fundamental conflict between public broadcasting and commercial enterprise: the focus shifts from programmes to audiences. In the case of advertising, the company paying to advertise its goods or services wants to reach as large an audience as possible. It is not interested in an informed public, an inquiring public, an adventurous public, and it is certainly not interested in a diverse public.

The ABC Act should be amended to make it clear that advertising is prohibited on ABC material transmitted via the Internet, as well as on radio and television.

The ABC currently is engaged in a range of commercial activities: ABC shops, the publishing of books, music and television film, the licensing of ABC content to mobile phones, third party websites, shopping centres, magazines. The extent to which these enterprises influence the integrity of the broadcaster is unknown.

An ABC which is fearless, innovative and comprehensive

The ABC is in danger of censoring itself out of innovative, comprehensive, wide-ranging programming of a high quality. Because of continuous, strident criticism, because of inadequate funding and because of provocative appointments to the Board, the ABC is likely to become increasingly bland, and much less excellent. “Diversity” must not become “acceptability to all”, “impartiality” must not become “resolutely neutral”.

The ABC should continue “to be a pace-setter in community discussion ...to ensure that Australians have an opportunity to be well-informed” - words deleted from the 2007 editorial policies.

An adequately and consistently funded ABC

The ABC Charter requires the ABC to “ provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard...”, to broadcast outside as well as inside Australia, and to encourage and promote the performing arts in Australia.” The ABC can not possibly comply with these demanding tasks unless it is adequately and consistently funded by government.

FABC Declaration - WHAT WE ARE FIGHTING FOR cont.

We propose four benchmarks of adequate and consistent funding:

- ▶ Comparison with commercial broadcasters in Australia.
- ▶ Comparison with public service broadcasters in other developed countries
- ▶ Public opinion.
- ▶ Freedom for the ABC to determine its own spending priorities

Only a public broadcaster can cater for the many different Australian audiences

The ABC must remain accessible to, and relevant to, all Australians. It is required to make both programs of popular appeal and programs for specialist audi-

ences. It must serve both majorities and minorities. It must make informative and educational programs, but it must also make entertaining programs. It must take account of the multicultural nature of Australia while at the same time contributing to a sense of national identity. These Charter aims must be upheld, and retained in the ABC Act. ■



OUR PROMINENT COMMUNITY SUPPORTERS

Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) are very pleased that the following members of our community have agreed to support this statement of our convictions about the continuing integrity of the ABC as a public broadcaster:

Ken Inglis,

Emeritus Professor, ANU

Maurice Barnes,

retired architect and publisher

Robin Brown,

President of ACTCOSS

The Right Reverend George Browning,

Anglican Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn

Betty Churcher AO,

Adjunct Professor, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research ANU, former director of the National Gallery of Australia

Judith Clingan AM,

Composer, Conductor, Music Educator

Marie Coleman PSM,

social justice advocate, columnist, educator and researcher

Lara Corry-Boyd M.D.

Brindabella Airlines, Telstra Business Woman of the Year (ACT)

Major General Bill Crews

National President, RSL (Support offered in a personal capacity)

Meredith Edwards, Emeritus

Professor, University of Canberra

Dr. Deb Foskey, MLA (Greens)

Marion Halligan AM,

award-winning novelist, essayist and short-story writer

Pauline Higginson,

Tilley's Lyneham

Malcolm MacKerras,

Veteran political analyst

Domenic Mico,

Community Artist

Councillor Frank Pangallo,

Mayor of the City of Queanbeyan

Bishop Pat Power,

Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn

Andrew Pike,

Ronin Films (and Electric Shadows)

Kim Sattler,

Secretary, Unions ACT

Dr Denis Saunders AM,

Weetangera ACT

John Shortis and Moya Simpson

(Shortis and Simpson: satire, cabaret style)

Rev Ian Tanner,

Past National President, Uniting Church in Australia

