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Changing Heads Glenys Stradijot

At the end of March, ABC Managing Director Russell Balding will leave the ABC, and in July the contract of Chairman Donald McDonald will expire. It is not publicly known if Mr McDonald wants to continue and if his contract will be renewed.

Russell Balding brought a sense of stability to the ABC after the short but damaging era of former managing director Jonathan Shier. He staunchly defended the ABC's independence on occasions the government overtly sought to interfere. But under his management the broadcaster has continued to decline and has moved further along the commercial track.

The ABC cannot be said to be fostering Australian culture and a sense of national identity when one in every four episodes of the flagship current affairs program *Four Corners* is no longer locally produced, Australian television drama fell to three hours for 2004–05, the depth of arts coverage has declined and original performance has dropped.

There is little doubt about the considerable impact on the ABC of a hostile government that has starved the broadcaster of funds, constantly monitored, accused and abused it. But is the government solely to blame for the proliferation of cheap lifestyle and entertainment programs? What of the ABC's push toward 'stars' and style over substance? And what of its money-making activities with their insidious impact on programming?

The chairman and managing director have failed to enunciate, let alone consult the community, on the ABC Board's vision for the ABC for the ABC continues to measure its success by ratings. On some networks it is becoming increasingly similar to its commercial competitors.

Rather than enlist the broad community support, it appears the ABC heads have sought to avoid embarrassing the Government. Largely, they have presented the broadcaster's case as a request for increased funds to expand into the future, and have attempted to hide from the public the impact of the erosion of funding on existing ABC services. The exception to this being when local television drama levels fell so low they could no longer be hidden and *Behind the News* was axed.

The public can only guess at the thinking behind the strategies employed by the chairman and managing director. Friends of the ABC does not know why the ABC is headed down a course in which its independence – and uniqueness – is being undermined. Is the board now stacked with people whose political interests run contrary to the survival of a robust independent broadcaster? Do the chair and managing director believe appeasement of the Government will attract more funds? Is the ABC influenced by some Shier-time appointees who have an outlook better suited to the commercial sector?

The newest appointment to the ABC Board is Steven Skala (Vice-Chairman of Deutsche Bank). What of the future? What type of managing Director will the Board select? And if the Government is to appoint a new Chairman later in the year, who might it be?

All in the community will need to be vocal to ensure the people appointed to manage Australia's treasured information and cultural institution are selected on the basis of competence and a commitment to independent public broadcasting. The ABC is too important to lose.



Virtual Fourth Estate doesn't come cheap ...

Emma Dawson

Addressing a conference on the purposes and principles of public broadcasting in November 2003, Head of BBC Television News, Roger Mosey, tackled head-on the ongoing relevance of public broadcasting in the Internet age. The BBC could be regarded, he said:

... as the outmoded product of the nanny state broadcasting era: the paternalistic voice of monopoly or duopoly ... surely these days, anyone can do news? ... Well, there is no sign of it being done on the scale the BBC can achieve; and the BBC is still unchallenged as ... the place where the nation comes to debate its big issues.

Mosey went on to clearly identify the reason for the ongoing relevance of the BBC in the Internet age, A licence-fee-funded BBC, free of commercial pressure, is able set high standards for online content and delivery – the proper role of the public broadcaster, regardless of medium.

No private operator has pretensions of fulfilling a public service role, or actively encouraging democratic engagement and participation through the provision of online networks. In the online world, just as in more traditional media, such lofty goals can only be the province of the public broadcaster.

So far, however, Australia's public broadcasters have shown little leadership in this regard. The ABC site is restricted to companion information for its radio and television programs, and chat rooms and forums related to its more traditional news and current affairs offerings. Similarly, a quick glance at SBS Online will reveal many shortcomings.

There is little evidence of innovation in the online public realm. Australia's public broadcasters perhaps do not understand how the development of online material expands and enhances their public service role; more probably, they are simply unable to fund its development. The creation of a virtual public sphere in the service of democratic society seems to be an impossible dream in Australia.

In the UK, however, the BBC is leading the way in the provision of online news and information services, and in creating new, technology-driven spaces for the Fourth

Estate. By maintaining a clear commitment to public value, and adhering to its charter obligations to 'inform, educate and entertain', the BBC has succeeded in carrying its reputation and expertise into the realm of new media. This commitment is the outstanding feature of the BBC as a media organisation.

Mosey believes strongly that 'what we have to do is ensure that our values underpin all our journalism, in whatever voice it speaks ... and [that] the right of our audience to trust what we say, whenever they see or hear the letters BBC, is absolute.'

“... in Australia, the challenge is yet to be met, largely due to the woefully inadequate funding available to the ABC.”

With this commitment firmly in mind, the BBC in 2003 created an online site with the intention of 'reengag[ing] a sceptical audience with the business of politics.' The first online initiative to result from the BBC's 2001 review of its political programming, *iCan* (as in 'I can do something to make a difference'), was the first real example of a public online service that both embraced the technological potential of the Internet to empower individuals, and maintained the values of traditional public service broadcasting. As such, it was a stunning example of the future of public service Internet production.

Launched in November 2003, the *iCan* home page clearly set out the purpose behind the site: 'iCan is designed to help people start taking action on issues they care about.'

Assessing the site's potential in *The Media Guardian*, Owen Gibson acknowledged that the potential of the Internet as a 'tool for democratic good' had been largely unfulfilled: '[Up] to now we've seen little real evidence of how it can bind together disparate voices, beyond one-off, single-issue examples.'

iCan can be seen as the first real attempt by a national public broadcaster to harness the power of the Internet and create a hybrid space between unregulated public

comment and discussion, and traditional one-way news provision. It has since been superseded by *Action Network*, a more sophisticated and interactive site with the same objective of enabling citizens to participate directly in the political process, and a direct result of the BBC's early investment in, and willingness to experiment with, the unique abilities of online technology.

This focus on empowering citizens and broadening the reach of the Fourth Estate must surely be the most innovative, effective and responsible approach to online production available to any public broadcaster – 'the perfect expression of its public service ideals.' Those ideals were best expressed by Mark Byford, then-acting Director General of the BBC, as a 'clear commitment to tough, rigorous, independent journalism which forms the foundation of any free and fair democracy.'

In the hubbub of multiple voices and unregulated opinions to be found in cyberspace, the need for responsible, accountable and impartial news and journalism is more pressing than ever before. We need a trusted voice, such } as a public broadcaster, to guide the way, to shine the light of truth on the darker corners of the Internet.

As Andrew Shapiro recognised in 1999 in *The Control Revolution*, the current explosion of communication technology:

requires that we rely more, not less, on certain trusted intermediaries: not super-personalized news services, but outlets that put a premium on being right instead of being first. We need to demand higher standards from our media middlemen ... We should, in other words, leverage our new power as news consumers to get better results from the media.

It seems that in the UK, these demands are being met online; in Australia, the challenge is yet to be met, largely due to the woefully inadequate funding available to the ABC to even maintain its current television and radio services, let alone develop the kind of ground-breaking and influential online content that is essential to securing the role of public broadcasters in the multimedia age.

ABC funding is currently under review. Government figures, so enamoured of digital and online technology in the commercial realm, must consider the requirements of the public online sphere when assigning funds for the coming triennial period. The Internet is the major source by which the majority of 18 to 30 year olds obtain their political and social information and by which they participate in democracy. If politicians wish to engage with this constituency, and to ensure that democratic needs continue to be served by public broadcasters, then increased funding to the ABC to allow it to develop its online presence is crucial.

Emma Dawson who has written in 2005 for FABC is a PhD candidate at Monash University and a fellow of Oz Prospect.

A Bald Statement

An extract from an email sent by the retiring Managing Director, Russell Balding, to all members of ABC staff.

Sent at 10.07am on 20th January 2006.

It has been a privilege for me to have worked with you and specifically for the last four and a bit years to have led the organisation, I believe the ABC I am leaving is in good shape, is in good spirits and is well positioned for continuing success. In the face of strong competition for the attention of Australians, the ABC remains a highly relevant part of our national infrastructure and a critical player in Australia's media cultural sector ..."

You will have to draw your own conclusions from the sentiments expressed and the words used. That one paragraph should be enough for a thesis!

Great Raffle Result

The 2005 Raffle, led by Georgina Simmonds, Damien O'Keefe and many volunteers was a real fund raiser enlarging FABC's Campaign Coffers by \$35,092.



From left: Margaret Simons, Eric Beecher, Robert Manne and from The Chaser, Julian Morrow.

Media Matters!

A well attended public forum, organised by the Campaign for Australian Media Diversity and FABC's Glenys Stradijot in particular, was held in the Melbourne City Conference Centre on November 16, 2005.

Moderator was Hon Alistair Nicholson and speakers were Robert Manne, Margaret Simons and Eric Beecher. Sponsors were Readings and Black Inc. Some of the points raised included the following.

Robert Manne outlined an Australia where over the past ten years, a conservative counter revolution had abandoned reconciliation, ended multiculturalism, closed our borders, adopted foreign policy of a US kind, turned its back on global warming, eroded ministerial responsibility and is now revitalising ancient sedition laws. Now a large part of the nation seems to be asleep and contemporary media is in a melancholy condition. Manne posited three trends: the stranglehold of Rupert Murdoch on the Australian daily press; the rise of an aggressive rightwing commentariat and an undisguised attack on the ABC. Any erosion of the cross-media laws will simply give greater power to the big proprietors and place the quality of our democracy at considerable risk.

Margaret Simons stressed that current media laws will not do for the future and that we need to do much forward thinking. There is a great deal of fear in the commercial sector as viewing audiences are declining. The internet shows every sign of being irrepressible and in a world of fragmented audiences where advertising revenue is now doubtful, content is the king! Yet sadly it would appear that no one is concerned with investing in content, perhaps with the single exception of sporting events.

As a content provider she agreed with Graeme Samuels of the ACCC who said that (he) was worrying not about the

channels (the arteries) but about the content (the blood).

Perhaps the big media empires may be run differently in the future; perhaps they are on their last legs and that we are entering a 'post colonial period' where as individuals we are thrown on our own resources. It is simply not enough to oppose these developments in law, we must think of new regulatory mechanisms and give content its due importance.

Eric Beecher doesn't see the situation as a lost cause but if the Federal Government does decide to abandon all cross media rules that this will be one of the greatest blows to democracy in Australia. There will be a frenzy of mergers/acquisitions with the result that there will be an even greater concentration of ownership than before. It is strange that this sort of change is *not* being discussed in any other similar countries. His picture of the confused state of the present Australian media industry was gloomy to say the least. But his explanation of the reasons for the present Government's plans were simple but chilling. There are two reasons, private and public. The private reason is simply because the biggest owners want them to do it and a government does not see survival likely if it doesn't bow to that want.

The public reason sounds ever so plausible. As Helen Coonan explains, the growth in new media technology has spawned diversity and therefore there is no need for outdated restrictions.

Any time now the Government is expected to release a public discussion paper on its proposed changes to media ownership laws. It is important that Australians respond in large numbers as they did to the Mansfield Review. The Government must know that we want no further loss in diversity of ownership.

From *The Argonauts* to MDA: An ABC Odyssey

Bill Garner

Let's be seriously pessimistic for a moment. In five years time the ABC has ceased to be a producer of television drama, natural history and expensive current affairs programs. It covers sport only as a news item. Within ten years the ABC has disappeared altogether, folded into SBS because this way you achieve downsizing and get past the advertising problem at the same time. The new organisation is a digital rump, consisting of podcasts, a news channel, a children's channel, and a nostalgia channel cleverly called the 'ABC', where we can visit the sort of programs the ABC used to make. Radio National has gone. There is only a local radio network supported by a single national news service out of Sydney.

It may not come to that. But for most of us who work on a freelance basis for the ABC as writers, actors and directors, this pessimistic scenario is already a reality. Since the 1950s the ABC has always been there as one more avenue of employment in a field where there are very few. TV Drama was one of the biggest departments and employed hundreds of casuals over the course of a year. But now, because ABC drama is a mere trickle at best, the ABC has virtually ceased to exist as a provider of that sort of casual employment.

The few hours of TV Drama that will be produced next year will employ only a couple of handfuls of people. Couple that with the decline in commercial television drama production and the situation is the worst since television began. When I was at school I could not imagine doing the sort of work I have ended up doing in television – acting, writing, producing – because there was no such industry. I grew up listening to the wireless: serials, plays and, of course, *The Argonauts*. I was a contributor. I sent in drawings. I was Hippoclydes 40, a rower in a ship of cultural adventure, part of a community created by the ABC for young listeners across the nation. I was joined at the ears to the wireless.

In our house the ABC had an almost religious presence. My mother listened to every episode of *Blue Hills* from when it began as *The Lawsons*. My father insisted on complete silence for the seven o'clock news. Every Sunday afternoon we bent

our heads together as we listened to the radio play. Over time, the repetitive sound effects became nightmarishly familiar.

We didn't get a TV set when television came in because I was still at school and my father was a headmaster. I have to say that my parents' expedient of simply not having a TV in the house was far simpler than trying to negotiate an individual contract with a VCE student addicted to computer games.



I never imagined working at the ABC. At the time I graduated from university, it was one of the hardest things to get into. I chose the softer option of academia. But then came the Vietnam war and life was turned on its head. After teaching Politics for a few years, I dropped out and became an actor with a theatre collective in Carlton. Like all actors, I depended on guest roles on television – mainly as petty criminals in the Crawford cop shows. I became so convincing at this that I was once hauled out of a pub by the consorting squad.

This was also when I first worked for the ABC. My first job was a day's work on a children's program. Then I got a continuing role in *Power Without Glory* as the communist who won the daughter of the robber baron. These were great days for ABC Television Drama. Money was flooding in from the Federal Government. Hundreds of people were employed on that one project alone. Drama was the flagship.

At the beginning of the 80s, after spending a year in New York, I wangled a job with ABC TV Drama as a scriptwriter and eventually moved in-house as a script editor. I stayed for seven years. These were the years when the squeeze was starting to be gradually applied; it was called accountability. But it was a place where it was possible to be quite radically creative.

By the 90s I was out of the ABC and freelancing. There was enough work around to make a reasonable living if you had a few strings to your bow – and my bow had so many strings it looked like a harp.

By the late 90s Australian television drama both commercial and on the ABC had largely been shifted to independent producers who were increasingly financed by overseas investors. The industry – including the ABC – became dependent on this external underwriting. This worked well for a time, and then the overseas money dried up and the ABC suddenly no longer had enough of its own money to make expensive dramas.

Then came reality TV. The commercial networks had found a cheaper way to attract audiences. Add in the decline of free-to-air viewers, the falling numbers watching Australian drama, and the technological shift away from free-to-air broadcasting and you get the crisis we have today.

At ABC TV Drama, although there are some projects in development, production has virtually ceased. There is one telemovie in production. It could be twelve months before we see a new ABC drama on air. The department has been stripped to the point where, a couple of months ago, the entire staff dedicated to TV Drama nationally was two. Without TV drama, the ABC loses one of its most enduring reasons for existing: telling our own stories.

I don't need to tell you that the whole ABC is now in a sorry state. It's a sinking ship that the crew valiantly refuses to abandon. There's a lot of pride and belief in the organisation still, despite the endless battering it receives from the Government and other critics. I have no doubt that this splendid loyalty exists because the ABC is publicly owned. This isn't loyalty to an employer, it is loyalty to the country.

Once public enterprises were what held the country together: a concrete form of sharing. The idea of 'equality' had not yet been abandoned. But the wind changed and both major political parties turned their backs on public ownership. They sold off everything they could. All that seems to be left is Medicare, Australia Post, a museum they hate, and the ABC.

So what has happened to the ABC in the last two decades is part of a wider story. The running down and selling off of our public infrastructure has been sustained for so long and in such a bipartisan way that it has, until now, seemed to be an unstoppable ideologically-driven juggernaut. Even the will to speak up in defence of public ownership seemed to have been weakened by a dreadful sense of inevitability.

For the free market purists committed to the small government principle that any enterprise should be run by private enterprise, there is no question that all media ought to be privately owned. To them, the ABC is simply a media organisation and government should get out of the business. As they should get out of the postal services.

But, if Australia Post is a special case, then is not the ABC even more so? The public attachment (dismissed by the hard heads as sentimentality) is in both cases a powerful political force – or should be. If people feel sentimental about the post office, how sentimental must they feel about the ABC?

But in a society in which there is no place for publicly owned enterprises, there is no place for sentimentality and no place for the ABC. Indeed, the ABC only came into existence – as did all the great public broadcasting organisations – because there was a belief that enterprises serving whole societies on an equal basis could only be created by governments. That is still the case and the continuing existence of the ABC is still, ultimately, linked to the survival of the residual belief among most Australians that there is a valuable – even necessary – place in Australia for public ownership of major institutions.

If this remnant belief in the virtue of public ownership is extinguished – or ignored – indeed, unless it is revived – the ABC will inevitably continue to shrivel. So, saving the ABC is a matter of re-engaging with the virtues of public ownership and with

the fundamental question: what sort of society do we want Australia to be? We cannot save the ABC by saving the ABC alone.

A vibrant, well funded public broadcaster is integral to the sort of Australia that wants to join Australian together in some larger idea, a great democracy for example, rather than break society down into individual units of consumption. The ABC is part of the democratic fabric of this country. It is a uniquely informing and culturally unifying agent in an increasingly loosely knit nation. Without it we will be more ignorant, more selfish, and less engaged with the greater social good.

The present government has a different vision, one that, on principle, always places private ownership above public ownership. The continuing existence of the ABC, with its dogged determination to get the truth out, is a standing contradiction to government ideology. It annoys them. You can see that on the faces of Ministers night after night. But, dislike the ABC as they may, no government is going to abolish it directly. There won't actually be a legislative move to abolish the ABC. Such a Bill would never get through, even with government control of both houses of federal parliament – that is now obvious. That is why the ABC is being destroyed by a thousand cuts. It may be slower, but it avoids the political problem.

But the very slowness of this nasty process of attrition provides a glimmer of hope. Even in its present debilitated state, the ABC is going to take a long time to actually sink beneath the waters. It is just possible that its continued existence may become a rallying point for the issue of public ownership more generally. The profound public support the ABC still enjoys is a problem for the government. The ABC is more than a media organisation; it is part of the glue that holds us within a single national culture. No privately owned organisation has either the mission or the capacity to fulfil that function in the way the ABC does. If you take the ABC out of the picture, the hole doesn't fill up. And the greater the economic divide, the more we need institutions such as the ABC to bridge it.

It is now clear that there is a serious disconnection between parliaments and the electorate. This is more than a crisis for the ABC; it is a crisis for Australian

democracy. So perhaps it is now not unreasonable to wonder if the privatisation ferris wheel has reached the top of its arc. For the first time, the signs are there. Despite controlling both Houses, the Federal Government is being forced into defensive positions.

If it is, the ABC's chances are better. Since privatisation began with the enclosures it has never been a one way flow. There is a sense out in the community that people fear this is now happening, that we've gone far enough. If that is right, the ABC might just wing it through, in some shape or other.

But will we ever get back home? Will the ABC ever again be a major producer of television drama? I doubt it. Scott Meek, the head of Drama, gives the department five years at the outside.

Television drama is falling over on the commercial networks, too. New shows are failing at a high a rate, so it is more than a matter of money. There is a question of audiences: where are they going? Will they be back? If the viewers keep turning away from drama, the networks will really put on the pressure to remove the quotas. And any government of this complexion will surely be sympathetic to their requests, for quotas are a form of protection and are anathema to free traders.

It doesn't look good. And, even if we do get back home and Australian drama recovers to some degree, the ABC may not be there. Without more funding it simply can't be. The future of all these things is a matter of political choice. But who decides? After all, it's our country and our taxes and our ABC. It's not a charity and we're not beggars. We own this thing. The ABC is one of the last great public stakes we do all own. But the political culture is now so dysfunctional that democracy has been increasingly subordinated to political managerialism.

So, the task is pretty straightforward: in order to save the ABC we have to reinvigorate the whole democratic process. But isn't that what it's been about all along?

This an edited version of a speech given by Bill Garner to the AGM of Friends of the ABC (Vic) in the Iwasaki Auditorium on October 25, 2005.

SLAPPED DOWN

Brian Walters

For democracy to flourish, it is essential that citizens have the freedom, in any medium, to engage in public debate, to express points of view, and to make their own responses to the world around them. Freedom of expression permits knowledge to flourish and prejudices to be challenged, and diminishes the alienation of those who are not heard.

One of the tools developed by US public relations organizations in the 1980s is the 'SLAPP' writ – an acronym for 'Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation'.

SLAPP suits are brought by powerful corporations not for the purpose of obtaining a genuine legal remedy, but in order to silence the community from speaking out about the issues that concern them.

Many community groups have experienced litigation designed to stop them speaking. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is currently fighting a case in the Federal Court brought by Australian Wool Innovations (the industry promotion body). Whatever the merits of that case, which are now a matter for the court, AWI seeks to prevent PETA campaigning against its industrial practices of mulesing and live

sheep export – a serious precedent for public discourse in this country.

In 1999 Alan Gray, editor of *Earth Garden*, wrote a book called *Forest Friendly Building Timbers*. The solicitors for the National Association of Forest Industries sent him a letter threatening to take him to court for deceptive and misleading conduct under the Trade Practices Act, because the book made a number of statements about the logging industry which they disputed.

The statements were all sourced and quoted from government reports. They were indisputable. And there were good statutory defences under the TPA anyway. But this would not matter – Alan Gray could not afford to bankrupt himself in order to prove he was right. Even a few days in court would be crippling.

NAFI demanded the shredding of all copies of the book, and an undertaking not to repeat any of these statements. Alan, unable to face the prospect of even a short Federal Court hearing, was at the point of capitulation.

The irony was that the Trade Practices Act is meant to be about consumer protection, and the logging industry wanted to keep information from consumers to protect its own interests.

After careful legal advice, Alan's lawyers sent a reply rejecting NAFI's demands and then sent the correspondence to the media.

It got a run in every paper, and eventually Professor Alan Fels (head of ACCC) offered the public opinion (on the ABC's National Interest program) that the NAFI letter itself may well amount to deceptive and misleading conduct, because the threat they made was empty.

NAFI did not bring proceedings, and the book was at the top of the non-fiction best seller list for months.

It's a good example of the way some big business operators misuse the court system – frequently without even having to take proceedings. In this case Alan Gray called their bluff – a good lesson in how to deal with SLAPP suits – stick together, go public, and don't let them get away with it.

The US has enacted legislation to outlaw SLAPP writs – we should do the same. Protecting free speech is vital to protecting democracy.

Brian Walters SC is president of Liberty Victoria and vice president of Free Speech Victoria



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Public's Right to Know Outcome of \$417,000 ABC Review

KPMG Australia, the consultant that recently conducted the Federal Government's review into the adequacy of the ABC's funding and the efficiency of the ABC's use of its funding, will be paid \$417,000.

From *The Australian*:

This is a huge amount of money for a report the Government says 'may not be made public'.

The ABC is seriously underfunded - when compared with the BBC and with its commercial competitors.

The ABC is a publicly funded body. Its financial capacity to meet its charter obligations should not be a secret.

The forthcoming May Budget will determine the ABC's funding for the next three years. Please phone or write to the media and to your local Coalition Federal Member of Parliament and the Prime Minister. Demand that KPMG's review be immediately made public, that the ABC be funded to fulfil its Charter commitments to a high standard, and that the Coalition honour its commitment to maintain the ABC free from advertising and sponsorship.

Glenys Stradijot

From the President

What our colleagues in Europe are doing

The European Alliance of Listeners and Viewers Associations (EURALVA – founded in 1996) describes itself as ‘an independent and influential alliance supporting Public Service Broadcasting – the only organization in Europe speaking for listeners and viewers on the full range of broadcasting and related issues’.

Being in Europe in January, I was able to diverge to Lisbon, where a two-day meeting of EURALVA brought together delegates from Denmark, England, Norway, Portugal and Spain. The Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, like FABC an associate member, was also represented.

All of us enjoyed the welcome our Portuguese hosts gave us, and opportunities to appreciate the lovely and historic city of Lisbon! However, at the Palacio Foz – a heritage building housing the Media Ministry – EURALVA put in some hard work, with papers delivered and several concepts workshopped. Most interesting was the finalising of a submission to the EU.

EURALVA's submission to the Commission decries the proposed removal of the requirement to separate commercial

promotion from programs (which would allow product placement in TV programs), and asks for a continued guarantee that all viewers – no matter which broadcaster is involved – will have access to short reports on events of public interest. We can recognise here the idea of mounting guard on the operation of purely commercial interests, and responsibility to perform community-building tasks, we associate with the ABC brief – complicated in Europe by the need to coordinate these tasks through a Contact Committee of national regulators from 25 member States and the EU Commission.

So the issues come in a different form, but we share our focus on principles. As well as issuing a Press Release related to the EU Commission's proposals, the meeting accepted for public use a five-line list of principles of public service broadcasting.

We have much to gain by studying the position that Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) has attained in the UK and EURALVA is clearly working for in the European Union – to become a trusted interlocutor, called on by governing bodies for responses and suggestions. Not every



government works this way, but the relationship can be a goal. National and international conversations do need community voices!

Judith Rodriguez

Friends of the ABC at the Royal Melbourne Show 2005



The FABC stall at the show was a fantastic success. With the help of about fifty volunteers, we discussed the issues and problems faced by the ABC with literally, hundreds of people from all sectors of society, including country people, families and young people. Many of these people had not even considered that there were any threats to the ABC.

In the process, nearly 2000 people signed cards to be sent to John Howard asking that the ABC be funded properly and for the ABC to remain independent and comprehensive.

Most people we spoke to were very enthusiastic about the ABC and the role it plays, from those who liked it because of the high quality, commercial-free children's programs to those who understood its vital importance for a democracy.

We also took more than \$2200 in donations, sales of merchandise and memberships.

Many visitors to the stall were people who had looked through the ABC van next to us, but others were passing by and attracted by our helium-filled balloons. These proved to be an outstanding success in both attracting all sorts of people to the stall – particularly families and teenagers – and being an advertisement for the FABC, as they were apparently the only helium-filled balloons at the show, believe it or not, and they stood out high above everyone's heads.

Thank you again to everyone who helped. We would not have been able to do it without you.

Rosie Spear and Shirley Parkes

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them to the Editor, *News & Views*,
GPO Box 4065, Melbourne, VIC 3001
or email: fabcvic@vicnet.net.au

Good News

ABC wins Tender for Australia Channel

The ABC will continue to operate an overseas television service at least until 2011, with its Asia-Pacific television service soon to become known as the Australia Channel.

Sanity has prevailed. Perhaps the commercial media's recent coverage of Asian events prompted the Government to think carefully about the significance to Australia's national interest of how Australia is portrayed overseas. After forcing the ABC to compete against other

bidders for the contract to continue its overseas television service, in December the ABC was selected as the preferred tenderer over Sky News Australia, PBL, Seven Network and the British BskyB).

The ABC is also to be congratulated on upholding the ABC's independence from government. It refused to accept terms which would have allowed federal government control over programming content on the service.



TRUTH MATTERS ... This is where it is

So says the ABC screen. Of course it matters, but do we get the truth or just another version of events?