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Imagine Australia without the ABC...

ISSUES, such as climate change, the drought, the war, education and health, may be more prominent than the ABC in the forthcoming election campaign. But the ABC is incredibly important to Australians because it reports news accurately, analyses news and current affairs and helps to preserve Australia's history and culture.

In regional and country areas the ABC is very important. Make sure that whoever wins government truly supports ongoing and improved funding to let the ABC do its job properly.



Please take action for the 2007 Election

Let candidates of major parties in your electorate know: The healthy future of Australia's independent national public broadcaster is important and I will consider it when I vote.

TELL THEM: You want the ABC to be independent – from government and from commercial influence.

ASK: Will your party retain the present prohibition on advertising and sponsorship on the ABC? Will it extend that prohibition to ABC websites?

ASK: What new system for appointments to the ABC Board will your party introduce so that board members are appointed on the basis of merit and a commitment to independent public broadcasting? Will it reinstate the staff-elected director position on the Board?

TELL THEM: You want the ABC to be well funded and funded in a manner that upholds its independence.

ASK: Will your party incorporate targeted funding the government has already promised to the ABC into the ABC's base triennial funding? Having first deducted from the calculation any targeted funding your party will incorporate into the ABC's base triennial funding, by how much per year will it increase the ABC's base triennial funding? When?

TELL THEM: You want the ABC to remain accessible to all Australians. The public must not be charged for different ways to access the ABC that new technology brings.

ASK: Will your party amend the ABC Act to guarantee Australians full and free access, without individual cost, to the services a modern public broadcaster should provide - radio, television, websites and cybercasting?

TELL THEM: You want ABC production to be rebuilt, to reverse privatisation of the ABC through the backdoor.
ASK: Will your party cease the provision of funding for the ABC that is contingent on the ABC using those funds to purchase programming from the private sector? Will it remove the financial disincentive for the ABC to make programs, by ensuring the ABC has the same access as private producers to government assistance?

TELL THEM: You want Radio Australia – an important service to Australians abroad and to our neighbours – to be rebuilt.
ASK: Will your party ensure the ABC is funded and guaranteed full access to transmission facilities, including shortwave, that will enable it to independently broadcast the full range of programs to at least the reach and extent prior to the closure of the Cox Peninsula transmission system?

Contact details for candidates in your electorate hopefully can be obtained from the Electoral Commission, once the election is called:

AEC phone 132326 or <http://www.aec.gov.au/>
Democrats <http://www.democrats.org.au/>
Greens <http://www.vic.greens.org.au/>
Labor <http://www.alp.org.au/people/index.php>
Liberal <http://www.liberal.org.au/>
National <http://www.nationals.org.au/>

Robert Manne at the AGM

WE ARE DELIGHTED that Professor Robert Manne will be the Guest Speaker at the Friends of the ABC (Vic) Annual General Meeting.

**FABC AGM
Sunday 11 November**
Iwaki Auditorium,
ABC Southbank, Melbourne.
Meeting 2.15 for 2.30pm start
Guest speaker 3.30pm



Professor Alan Knight

Friends of the ABC National Spokesperson

ALAN KNIGHT was appointed national spokesperson of Friends of the ABC at FABC's National Conference in Melbourne in May 2007.

Friends of the ABC organisations across Australia are gearing up for the federal election. Alan Knight will head their election campaign to draw attention to a serious risk of the ABC being pushed further down the commercial track and carrying ads.

Alan Knight is a Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the Queensland

University of Technology and an Emeritus Professor at Central Queensland University. He is a journalist and academic with strong experience in university governance.

Before becoming an academic, Alan Knight was a broadcaster and editor working for the ABC, Australian Associated Press, Nation Review and Radio Television Hong Kong.

Alan has a specialist interest in Foreign Correspondence and Asian Studies, and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Asian Studies at Hong Kong University.



Professor Alan Knight national spokesperson of Friends of the ABC

Watch Alan on YouTube

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fADnP_AENTU

National Conference – May 2007

At the Friends of the ABC National Conference (May 2007) representatives from State/Territory FABCs met to consider the issues crucial to the future of the national broadcaster.

QUENTIN DEMPSTER, the staff-elected ABC Board member in exile, addressed the National Conference on the important issues of:

- Commercialisation of the ABC from within
- ABC 'plans' to take advertising on their website
- Balance and bias on the ABC.

Quentin also stressed the issue of digital broadcasting, suggesting Government policy was to hold the digital revolution back to suit the Commercial Broadcasters.

Quentin thanked FABC for all their efforts and emphasized how much ABC staff appreciate our support.

The media we deserve



David's Salter's new book, subtitled *Underachievement in the Fourth Estate* is a critical analysis of the Australian media, including the ABC, failing in its responsibility to the public.

David Salter is a prominent independent journalist and television producer. The foreword of *The Media We Deserve* is by Stuart Littlemore QC, founding presenter of *Media Watch* at the time Salter was the program's executive producer.

Come clean on commercialisation of SBS & ABC

"STIFF AND STIFFER." Those erectile dysfunction ads on SBS television are helping to spotlight the Howard government's insidious agenda for public broadcasting in Australia.

The 2004 Liberal Party election manifesto made no mention of stretching or reinterpreting the *SBS Act's* definition of 'natural breaks'. From 1992, when advertising was introduced at SBS through an amendment to the *SBS Act*, the SBS board's consistent legal advice was that 'natural breaks' meant ads could only be broadcast *between* programs, not during them, with the possible exception of lengthy sporting coverage. That interpretation prevailed from 1992 to 2007. Last year the [Carla] Zampatti-chaired

board at SBS overruled that 15-year internal legal advice to seek an external counsel's opinion.

That process produced for the SBS board a legal opinion that "natural breaks" could be interpreted as meaning convenient spots *within* programs. Equipped with this highly questionable and still legally untested opinion, the SBS board, without advance notice or consultation with its audience, set about turning SBS television into a fully commercial channel.

In fact, the Zampatti board's business plan is to turn SBS Television into Australia's fourth free-to-air commercial channel. Don't take my word for it. An eagle-eyed informant, knowing my

aversion to commercialising public broadcasting in Australia, spotted the SBS business strategy in *B&T*, the advertising industry magazine.

On January 17, just as SBS was to start broadcasting ads through its new hour-long news, documentaries, feature films and other programs, *B&T* told the advertising and marketing industry that SBS was out 'to position SBS as Australia's fourth commercial network'.

The ethnic communities of Australia, for which SBS was created by the Fraser government (1975–83), have almost given up on SBS. With its ratings-chasing programming in sport and the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



Journalist, author and ABC broadcaster Quentin Dempster

Good news so far from Labor

While major parties are yet to release their election policies for the ABC, the ALP has recently updated its platform; which is intended to be an enduring statement of commitments, as opposed to policies that are announced each election.

In a letter to Friends of the ABC on 2 May 2007, Kevin Rudd, Federal Labor Leader wrote:

'... The ALP Platform at paragraph 58, sets out Labor's policy in relation to the ABC Board, as follows:

"Labor will end political interference in the ABC by introducing a new ABC Board appointment process in which board members are appointed on the basis of merit.

Candidates will be considered by a panel established at arm's length from the minister who will appoint Board members from a shortlist prepared by the panel... Labor will examine other options for further increasing the transparency and democratic accountability of the ABC and SBS Boards. In accordance with Labor's commitment to the principles of participatory decision making and industrial democracy in the public sector, the staff elected commissioner position on

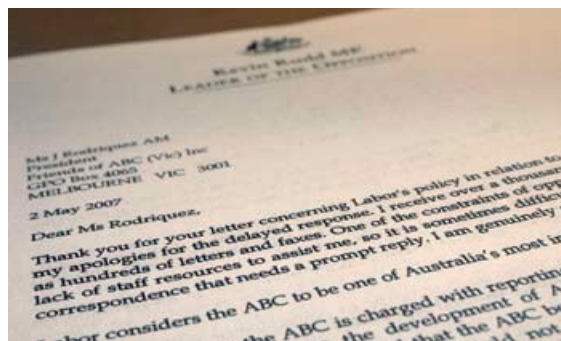
the ABC board which was abolished by the Howard Government will be reinstated."

In an Interview with Kerry O'Brien on *The 7.30 Report* on 30 April 2007, I further noted that: "When it comes to the future composition of the board of the ABC, I'll be instituting a parallel process [to that of Fair Work Australia] so we don't allow the politicisation of the board of the ABC. I'm passionate about the integrity of public institutions. Public institutions have been prostituted by this Government so much over the last decade that we've actually got to draw a line. We need to restore the integrity of institutions so that they are put beyond the reach of partisan politics ... I will not make an appointment of any former politician or political staffer to any position on the board of the ABC. We've got to restore the integrity of institutions like the ABC fully."

The ALP Platform at paragraphs 55 and 56 sets out Labor's policy in relation to ABC funding, as follows:

"Labor is committed to ensuring adequate funding and support for Australia's public broadcasters, to enable them to continue to provide Australians with high quality broadcasting services, free from political and commercial interference."

Labor will provide funding on a triennial basis to the ABC and the SBS to ensure they can deliver quality public broadcasting services. Labor will ensure that the national broadcasters are able to exploit the potential of new technology to



Kevin Rudd's letter to FABC on 2 May, 2007

deliver attractive and innovative content over digital television and the internet."

The ALP Platform at paragraph 59, sets out Labor's policy in relation to advertising on the ABC as follows:

"Labor will ensure that the ban on advertising remains in place. Labor will also ensure that advertising is not permitted on ABC branded websites."

Labor considers it crucial to ensure the ABC's commercial independence and to return the ABC to its former state of independence, so as to enhance democracy by screening unbiased coverage of news and current affairs.

Importantly, as the ABC has moved under the Coalition to outsource much of its production, Labor's platform also commits it to "ensure the ABC produces high levels of local content".

FABC will keep you informed, letting you know when we receive answers to specific questions FABC will put to major parties prior to the election.

ABC Children's Channel – ABC3

THE GOVERNMENT is expected to announce a new ABC digital television channel for children during the election campaign.

Friends of the ABC would welcome the ABC having sufficient funds to re-establish a dedicated children's television channel. Now that television is under scrutiny for its role in childhood obesity and inappropriate sexualisation, the value of a public broadcaster which does not carry commercials or regard children as consumers to be exploited has become even more obvious.

The ABC's last effort to establish a digital children's channel, ABCKids in 2001, was short-lived. When the promise of a children's channel comes in this election campaign, the determinant of genuineness will be the amount of additional ongoing funding committed to the ABC.

The ABC needs sufficient funds to ensure money will not be drawn from other resource-starved ABC services, and to enable it to produce and purchase quality children's programming, especially programs that reflect our local culture.

FABC is also concerned to know what the government will do to ensure all Australian children have access to a new ABC children's channel. Only around 30 per cent of households presently have free-to-air digital television.

Australia is one of the few developed countries in the world which is now almost entirely lacking in radio programs for children. With radio production being far cheaper than television, it's time the ABC had sufficient resources to fill this gap in its children's programming too.

GS



ABC children's program *Bottle Top Bill*

Seventy-five today

Judith Rodriguez, President of FABC (Vic) spoke at Southbank, Melbourne on 1 July 2007, the ABC's 75th Birthday before a cast of thousands – well, hundreds & thousands!

IN THE OPENING SENTENCE of *This is the ABC*, Ken Inglis tells us that at 8pm on July 1, 1932, in every state of the Commonwealth of Australia, the chime of the bells in the tower of the Sydney General Post Office was broadcast followed by the words "This is the Australian Broadcasting Commission". And so began a nation-affirming institution.

The Sydney GPO building now serves other masters but the ABC is with us and seventy-five today, adapting with the vigour of a seventeen-year-old to new technologies.

Quite a few Friends of ABC vintage, like me, look after people a generation older. We have an obligation to understand, nourish, inform, and entertain a beloved parent. We'll back the ABC as a child whose responsibility will not cease with the growing years – Australia will still be there, needing all that and more!

But Australia is also the kids, and the community is more various than ever before; it even includes people in other countries who are now within earshot and who can view what we put on their screens.



Judith Rodriguez cutting the ABC's 75th birthday cake

Yes, Aunty's job has grown. She's very good at it, but we've got to make sure she has the dosh to do it – and do us proud.

One thing, program-making is her job, not walking the streets with a sandwich-board – or whatever - just for a bit of cash. Goodness knows what rubbish she might stuff in our heads or tell the kids, if she's beholden to someone that's not us, Australia – someone holding the purse-strings, with an interest in pushing prejudice or misinformation or their own enterprises. No ads on the ABC – not on any of the ABC's services!

And though Aunty's got a Board to oversee her activities – to see she has what she needs, and can get the best possible result from the resources available – and

to talk with government, which is better than having the Government of the day directly ordering her about – let's remind them they're there to help. To buck her up, not put her down. Especially when all the prying and tale-telling in the world hasn't picked a hole in her good principles and expertise. She's doing wonders – but on a shoe-string.

At seventy-five years young and heading for the century, our independent, creative ABC is a treasure. But with threats of commercialisation, and an ideologically skewed Board appointed without proper process, she needs her Friends if she's to be treated right and allowed to stay honest. *Happy birthday and many happy returns, Aunty!*

Letter to the Editor

Clarke & Dawe the best

Inspired by ABC Radio and their latest search for the 'best of' (at the moment, Greatest Speeches) I suggest we nominate the time when, come what may, we will not answer the phone. In my case this is 7.56 pm on Thursdays when Clarke and Dawe are on *The 7.30 Report* giving us their distillation of political wit which makes it possible to listen to the actual politicians for the next week – well almost.

I could move on to what makes me scream and hit the off button but that could get quite nasty.

Ruth Boschen



John Clarke & Brian Dawe



Endangered Species Card

MANY OF YOU will have seen and signed the new Card addressed to the Prime Minister, respectfully requesting an ABC free from commercial influence and with restored funding levels to enable quality programming. The Card also calls for a strong independent and comprehensive national broadcaster in a country where there is little media diversity left.

Many hundreds of the card have already been signed, particularly at the ABC's Birthday Party at Fed Square on Sunday 5 August.

Cartoon by Fiona Katauskas

FABC at ABC 75th Celebrations

ONCE, Friends of the ABC was a welcome guest at ABC events. While the ABC executive did not always agree with our criticisms of it, FABC's role of critical support for the ABC was respected. The ABC appreciated the importance of public support for the national broadcaster and our part in letting the community know what is happening to the ABC.

That changed as the ABC Board was stacked by this government. The ABC Executive has appeared at best concerned not to aggravate the government, and, at worst, interested to protect it. Nowhere was that more clearly demonstrated than when FABC set up its stall for the ABC's recent 75th celebrations in Federation Square. Despite Federation Square being a public place, and the public broadcaster being an advocate of free speech, the ABC first attempted to stop Friends handing material to the public, then instructed it to pack up its stall and leave.

But, for that day at least, all is well that ends well. After Matthew Ricketson, Media and Communications editor for *The Age*, sought to check with managing director Mark Scott if it was true the ABC wanted to evict FABC, and to ask why, Mark Scott visited FABC's stall to assure us we could stay. Over one year into his term, FABC's campaign manager, Glenys Stradijot was pleased to meet with Mark Scott, albeit briefly.



ABC 75th Anniversary Celebrations Federation Square, Sun 5 August 2007

ABOVE: FABC stall worker, Sam Carter, with young supporters

RIGHT: Rosie Spear, Joyce and Celia Milton at the FABC stall



To see *The Age* front page article which appeared the next day (6/8/07), please visit our website.

Friends Committee

PRESIDENT: Judith Rodriguez AM

VICE-PRESIDENT: Gael Barrett

SECRETARY: Georgina Simmonds

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Peter Milton

TREASURER: Mary Mahoney

MEMBERS: Pam Caven, Michael Kinnane, Jenny Lee, Judy McKenzie, Peter Monie, Rosie Spear, Olivia Tattam

CAMPAIGN MANAGER/EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Glenys Stradijot

ADMIN OFFICER: Patrick Barrett

Friends Newsletter

EDITOR: Peter Monie

DESIGN & TYPESETTING: Dan Milne

PRINTING: Posh Printing

Issued three times a year: Autumn, Winter & Spring. Letters from members are welcome. Send to the Editor, *News & Views*, GPO Box 4065, Melbourne, VIC 3001 or EMAIL: fabcvic@vicnet.net.au Letters may be edited for length.

News & Views and more is available on FABC's website www.fabc.org.au

Friends Notices

FABC Website

Our website address is:
<http://www.fabc.org.au/vic/>

Please visit and explore. There is additional material for which there was insufficient space in this newsletter and longer versions of some articles. You can also register to receive emails about events, actions needed, or activities like film nights

FABC Communications – Your Feedback Wanted

In running an active campaign, it is a difficult task to balance the allocation of scarce, skilled people-resources between getting on with the job that needs to be done and keeping members informed.

We would appreciate your feedback on FABC's two main methods of broad information delivery - its Newsletter *News & Views* and its website www.fabc.org.au

We need to know what you like and what you don't; and anything you want, that is presently unmet.

Please give us your feedback. Write, email or phone (See contact details on Page 1).

We are redesigning our website : the current wishlist includes the following:

- Secure area for online payment of subscriptions, donations and for merchandise
- Search function – so that you can search for information and articles relevant to your needs by inserting your chosen key words
- Online calls to ACTION, including provision for 'signing' petitions (similar to GetUp, AVAAZ and others)
- More provision for news and information about forthcoming events.

We would *really* appreciate your views

Bullying the ABC

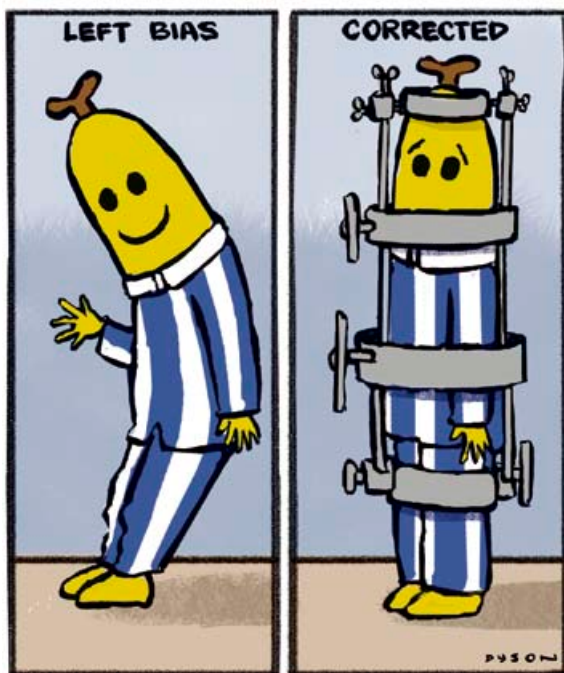
Dr Carmen Lawrence

Earlier this year, the Prime Minister used a major speech to highlight the worrying incidence of bullying in our schools, exhorting principals to deal with the problem – or face a loss of funding! The irony of this position was not lost on political observers; the same man whose government has made an art form of bullying warning us of the corrosive effects of such bullying; a government defined by its use of threats and intimidation berating our educators for their failure to deal with identical behaviour in children.

GOVERNMENT BULLYING has not been confined to the vulnerable – public servants, scientists and journalists have all been targets in the government's systematic attempts to control what the public knows by making it abundantly clear that anyone who criticises the government will face negative repercussions, including humiliation and marginalisation. The government has been aided and abetted in this by its apologists, who have made an art form of personally vilifying critics, apparently hoping to muzzle them with ad hominem attacks; refusing to deal with their arguments and evidence by questioning their motives and affiliations. (Several of these Howard 'culture war' shock troops now sit on the ABC board). What the government clearly understands is that people often respond to petty tyranny and small coercions; 'It only takes a little bit of coercion to produce a great deal of fear.'

As evidence has mounted of the government's systematic use of fear for political purposes to legitimise its own actions and attack its detractors, there is a growing realisation that this has succeeded in fostering a 'climate of timidity' in public debate. This is an anthem in a democracy which depends for its health on robust, diverse and independent discussion, especially in the media, to buttress the core foundation of free speech. After eleven years of the Howard government, the political culture is dominated by a near uniform mindset; the media, the think tanks, the lobbyists, the public service, non-government organisations all bend to the Coalition party line – or face the consequences. Even the Canberra gallery, once respected for its noisy independence, seems intimidated, as the Howard government wields pressure to exclude critics and neutralise any opposition.

There is no doubt that media's capacity to hold the government to account has been diminished. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ABC, whose independence has been under sustained attack since the election of the Howard government. While it is fair to say, as Schultz observes, that the ABC (and later SBS) won increasing



First published
by *The Age*

editorial control from political interference throughout the 70s and that an 'uneasy truce' was maintained during the 80s and early 90s, this has now unravelled. On top of funding cuts, board stacking and concerted attacks by government MPs, formal surveillance of the ABC was instituted by Minister Alston who insisted that current affairs and news should be monitored for 'balance' and that even tone of voice and emphasis should be assessed. In the event, the various assessments carried out confirmed that the majority of coverage was 'even-handed'. This did not satisfy the government and prior to the 2004 election, external media monitors were hired to check again for bias. They found none. But the government is nothing if not persistent, and the ABC finally succumbed to the implied threats and appointed a "director of editorial policies" to police new guidelines which, until recently, applied principally to news and current affairs, but are now applied on virtually all program content across the ABC.

Such capitulation has reportedly weakened staff morale and as Quentin Dempster warned, 'there is a danger, already apparent to many, that the ABC's journalism is degenerating into careful

blandness.' Perhaps this is why long-term executive producer and Walkley award-winner Peter McEvoy quit *Media Watch* following ABC managing director Mark Scott's announcement, while launching the new guidelines, that *Media Watch* would be required to revise its format and content to ensure a wider coverage of 'contentious and important issues'.

Government interference extends beyond persistent allegations of bias to direct intervention in programming and content. In 2002, Michael Kroger, former activist in the Liberal Party and then Board member, tried to influence the way *Four Corners* depicted his friend, talk show host Alan Jones. Jones was saved again when ABC books unceremoniously dropped Chris Masters' biography of Jones, allegedly following intervention from board members. In recent weeks it has emerged that climate change denying board members again exerted pressure on the national broadcaster to screen a widely criticised documentary questioning the science behind climate change. Against the weight of global scientific opinion and the advice of the ABC's own science journalists, the ABC has buckled to pressure.

Clearly, intimidation and the threat of sanctions are taking their toll on the ABC. Bullying works.

Dr Carmen Lawrence trained as a research psychologist and was Australia's first woman premier. She will retire as an ALP Federal Member of Parliament at the forthcoming election. Her latest book, *Fear and Politics* deals with the way in which fear is being used to shape Australian public policy.

The Enemy Within the ABC



The decision to shut down the Natural History Unit without feeling the need to explain shows how far the ABC has travelled down the path of arrogant contempt for the listeners and viewers – the citizens of Australia. See opposite the open letter to the Chairman, signed by some eminent Australians. Australian of the year, Tim Flannery, has also supported the letter

A Giant Cuttlefish from the ABC Natural History Unit's brilliant Cuttlefish program

OPEN LETTER TO THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION (ABC) BOARD:

Maurice Newman, Chairman, ABC Board
15th September 2007

Dear Mr Newman

RE: Closure of the ABC's Natural History Unit

We are dismayed at the ABC decision to shut down its Natural History Unit.

ABC wildlife and environment documentaries have enthralled audiences since the ABC began producing them in 1969. Importantly, they have enhanced community appreciation of the environment.

A winner of many prestigious awards, the ABC's Natural History Unit (NHU) is acclaimed worldwide for its excellent programs focusing on Australian nature issues and those of our neighbours – Papua New Guinea, South East Asia and Antarctica.

Local documentary making will suffer without the NHU. The high standards it sets for Australian documentaries will be diminished. Its role in training and nurturing natural history program-makers inside and outside the ABC will be lost.

The ABC has a great history of producing quality natural history programs. Its contribution to public understanding of the significance of the environment to Australia's future is crucial.

The national broadcaster has the strong support of the community to secure the government funding it needs to continue to be an independent world-class producer. We call on the ABC Board to meet its obligations under the ABC Charter to inform and educate by immediately reversing its decision to close the Natural History Unit.

Yours sincerely

Professor Ian Lowe AO, ACF
/ Griffith University

Penelope Figgis AO,
IUCN / WCPA

Chris Baxter OAM, founding
editor of *Wild*

Ken Taylor, founding
producer of the ABC's NHU

Prof. David Lindenmayer,
Fenner School of Env.& Soc.

Professor Tom Griffiths,
Aust. National University

Julia Playford,
University of Queensland

David Yencken AO,
Australian Collaboration

Don Henry,
Exec. Director of ACF

Virginia Young,
The Wilderness Society

Dr Peter Christoff, ACF /
University of Melbourne

Professor Alan Knight,
Central Queensland Univ.

ABC in campaign for free speech – part thereof!

In May this year an unprecedented alliance of major commercial media organisations, the ABC and SBS launched the *Australia's Right to Know* campaign to draw attention to the serious deterioration of free speech in Australia.

In a joint statement, heads of media organisations in Australia's Right to Know said: 'Many of the laws and restrictions imposed on the public's right to know do not look sinister in isolation. But together they form a very worrying situation for this country.'

ABC Managing Director Mr Mark Scott said: 'Freedom of speech is one of the fundamental pillars of a free and open society. It is as important as parliamentary democracy and the rule of law in guaranteeing the freedom and rights of all Australians.'

Fairfax Media Chief Executive Mr David Kirk said: 'Most Australians are unaware just how far their basic rights to know about the operations of government and public officials have been eroded. This issue is of profound public interest and warrants national prominence and priority.'

Shortly after Australia's Right to Know was launched, it became clear the campaign's interest in free speech stops at legislation and court actions that limit the freedom of media organisations generally. Its interest is not in other government actions that suppress political debate and silence dissent. (statement of Nick Cater, editor of News Ltd / Murdoch's *The Australian* in crikey.com 14 June, 2007)

So much for the statement of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser in 1976 (prior to the introduction of federal Freedom of Information law in 1982): 'If the Australian electorate is to be able

to make valid judgements on government policy it should have the greatest access to information possible. How can any community progress without continuing and informed and intelligent debate? How can there be debate without information?'

GS

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Australia now lags well behind most democracies in freedom of speech rankings compiled by two independent organisations, Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House. The latest worldwide press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, ranks Australia 35th – behind nations such as Bolivia (16th), South Korea (31st) and Ghana (34th).

Reporters Without Borders <www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=639>

Freedom House <www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fop/2007/pfscharts.pdf>

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2]

replacement of all foreign language programming with English language programs in prime time, SBS seems to have abandoned its original charter to enhance its commercial revenue. It is now re-jigging its news and current affairs output to adopt a more 'commercial feel'.

There needs to be an important reassessment of the future of SBS. The taxpayers of Australia, who have invested ten of millions of dollars each year in SBS, should be consulted. The ABC would have a stronger case to merge with SBS and take on its multicultural charter obligations through the internet, digital multi-channel free-to-air television and digital radio, if the ABC were not already infected with the commercial virus. This virus has been injected into its veins by the Howard government through the [Maurice] Newman board.

The Newman board has restructured the ABC divisions, replacing ABC Enterprises (which manages ABC Shops and other related products) with what it is calling ABC Commercial. With the *ABC Act* expressly prohibiting advertising on ABC radio and television, ABC Commercial wants to construct a new business plan around cybercast advertising on ABC Online. Broadcasting is rapidly morphing into cybercasting. If you miss tonight's edition of *The 7.30 Report*, *ABC TV News*, or any other ABC copyright program, soon you will be able to go to your computer and play the full digital video at any time. People are already watching the popular *The Chaser's War on Everything* and *Four Corners'* broadband editions through their internet.

There is nothing in the *ABC Act* to prevent the Newman board from inserting advertising in and around this content. The spirit of the *ABC Act*, drafted in 1983 before the internet was invented, is clearly against advertising. But the board has helpful legal advice that because the act is silent on internet advertising, there is nothing in the act to prevent cybercast advertising. (Lawyers. Don't you just love 'em?).

Again the Howard government, through Coonan, says it is a matter for the ABC board. But the government has no mandate from the Australian people to distort the existing funding base of the ABC and, through the commercial imperative this will create, its very purpose.

Public broadcasters view their audiences as citizens in a democracy to be informed, engaged and challenged through innovative, high-quality and comprehensive programming, not as consumers to be delivered up to advertisers. Both the ABC and SBS boards

will say enhanced commercial returns will mean more Australian programming. This is superficially attractive. But what sort of programming? Mark Scott, the ABC's new managing director, is a former editorial director of John Fairfax Holdings Ltd. We are told his Fairfax experience demonstrates that it is possible to separate church and state – editorial from commercial. This was rubbish at Fairfax and will be rubbish at the ABC.

Cybercast advertising at the ABC will be self-defeating. When push comes to shove in the pre-Budget Cabinet expenditure review committee, treasury advisers will monitor the ABC's commercial revenue and downwardly adjust the taxpayer appropriation accordingly.



Lindsay Foyle is a pocket cartoonist for *The Australian*

We now await the federal election campaign with interest. The future of public broadcasting should be on the agenda so that the Australian public can at least feel it is being consulted about its taxpayer investment in this sector.

The ABC board should have a transition strategy in the event that, as the polls now consistently indicate, there is a change of government. It should be telling the public just what the ABC can do for Australia through the digital free-to-air multi-channel and broadband revolution. The ABC could have an ABC Education division with a free-to-air English and other languages channel, a technical and further education channel, a dedicated Australian-made children's channel and other nation-building services which exploit this extraordinary and exciting technology. But the new chairman has not said 'boo' on any important topic of strategic importance to the ABC since his appointment last year.

The current ABC board cannot be relied on to advocate the cause of independent public broadcasting. It is in an ideological and party-political bog. If it is out to destroy the so-called ABC culture; introducing advertising on the ABC should do the trick.

The current threat is insidious.

Our minds must be clear. Labor policy announced this month is to prohibit cybercast advertising, stop the party-political stack of the ABC board and restore the staff-elected director position in the *ABC Act*. This is most welcome in an institution which has been under sustained ideological attack and vilification for more than a decade. But it is also hard to forget that under the Hawke/Keating governments 1983-1996 the ABC was substantially defunded. Pressure must be maintained on any incoming Rudd Labor government to rebuild the ABC's creative capacity and to protect the multicultural purpose of SBS.

In this regard, we need to know exactly what Kevin Rudd and Rupert Murdoch discussed at their New York meeting in April. Murdoch does not give photo ops to wannabe prime ministers without securing policy undertakings or, more euphemistically, understandings.

Murdoch would want extended indefinitely the outrageous regulatory protections for his 25 per cent share in the now profitable Foxtel pay-TV. He would also be seeking ways in which he and James Packer could wrest the other 50 per cent of Foxtel away from Telstra without having to pay an extortionate price. He would also want the ABC to be further marginalised, just as public broadcasting is marginalised in the US.

Where would public broadcasting stand in the event of a change of government in Canberra? Please let us know, Mr Rudd. In the meantime, those who want the ABC to survive as an adequately funded, independent, mainstream and non-commercial public broadcaster will have to fight hard. We must never get tired.

This article was originally published in *The Walkley Magazine*. It has been edited for reasons of space limits. The full article can be read on our website: <http://www.fabc.org.au/vic/>

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