

News+Views

Issue 40 / Spring 2012

Radio National Lite

Further erosion of a unique network

> Details page 2



Death of the Doco

Specialist documentary losing out at the ABC

> Details page 3



Securing the ABC's independence

The law to stop politicians stacking the ABC Board

> Details page 4



Fund it or risk losing it

Critical last Budget for the ABC before the election

> Details page 4



Media matters

Friends meet new ABC Chair

Victorian Friends of the ABC vice president Gael Barrett and campaign manager Glenys Stradijot met recently with the new ABC Chairman, the Hon James Spigelman AC QC.

The meeting was an opportunity to introduce Friends of the ABC to the first ABC chairman appointed under the merit-based board appointment process which FABC campaigned to have implemented.

Friends of the ABC welcomed James Spigelman to his new appointment. To be chairman of the ABC is to hold one of the most significant positions in the country, which carries with it the huge responsibility to defend the ABC's independence from both government and commercial influence, and to encourage and support a public broadcaster of the highest quality and integrity.

FABC informed Mr Spigelman that FABC will be working for funding in the forthcoming Budget that will enable the ABC to thrive as an innovative producer of quality programming. Mr Spigelman stressed the need for additional capital funding. The ABC has struggled for many years to balance its funds between program-making and the constant need to maintain and modernise its equipment

FABC expressed its view that under the former ABC Board the ABC had become less than fearless in some areas and more populist. Commercial activities we expressed concern about included the dismantling of the ABC's production capacity in favour of outsourcing, and on-air advertising which is an irritant to ABC audiences.

Given the public broadcaster's importance in the life of the nation and the high level of community interest in the ABC, Friends of the ABC believes there should be greater



The Hon James Spigelman AC QC

transparency in its governance. FABC asked that the ABC Board consider making its minutes publicly available, as does the governing body of the BBC.

The meeting concluded with FABC confirming its wish to maintain a positive ABC-FABC relationship to work for the interests of the independent public broadcaster. There was not time to discuss in detail the matters that Friends of the ABC raised. However, we are hopeful that Mr Spigelman, with his admirable record of public service, will consider the feedback it provided.



Michael 'Dan' Mori – former US military lawyer will speak on the media's impact on his human rights work

SUNDAY 18TH NOVEMBER

Iwaki Auditorium, ABC Southbank

FABC AGM 2.15 for 2.30 pm start

SPEAKER Dan Mori 3.15 pm

Public welcome

inset left: former Guantanamo Bay inmate David Hicks who was famously represented by Major Mori

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Moving to Radio National Lite



ABC
Radio National

The erosion of Radio National – renowned for its breadth of programs of intellectual and cultural integrity – continues.

While RN still retains some outstanding programs, recent years have seen RN shifting its direction. Programming that offers food for the imagination and programs of depth made by people with expertise and experience are disappearing.

For RN's 2012 schedule, *The National Interest*, which dealt with significant policy issues, was dropped. *Artworks* was axed and the arts merged into RN's dedicated book program.

Generalist talk programs, traditionally a feature of local radio, took the place of specialist programming in some time slots. The length and consistent depth of RN's current affairs documentary program *Background Briefing* declined.

'Flow programming', an anathema to RN's style of distinct programs, was introduced to some time blocks, resulting in audience confusion about the time they needed to tune-in to the programs of their choice. "Light weight" are words commonly used by RN listeners to describe several of the programs new to RN in 2012.

Now, some of RN's distinguished program-makers will be forced to leave. Included in the 11 staff who are expected to be made redundant are winners of prestigious radio awards and highly experienced program-makers held in esteem locally and abroad.

Next year, ABC management will axe *Airplay*. From Dickens to science fiction and political satire, plays have been performed on ABC radio since the 1930s. Gone will be the only outlet for Australian radio drama and a tradition which is as old as Auntie herself.



Robbie Buck interviewing Peter Garrett for RN's Midnight Oil special due soon

The Book Reading will be dropped. No longer will radio audiences experience the delight of book reading, another important art form.

Creative Instinct, the experimental arts program *The Night Air*, and *Lingua Franca* will



Paul Kelly in a live broadcast of *The Music Show* at the 2012 Melbourne Festival

be cut too. *Movie Time* will finish. RN's book program whose mandate was broadened this year to become Arts and Books will be further diluted to incorporate film.

Other programs will have shortened preparation times. *Hindsight*, *360 Documentaries* and *Into the Music*, feature programs which tell mostly non-fiction stories, will be among programs to have their staff cut.

FABC is concerned that new arts programs for RN's 2013 schedule may include a large number of international, mostly American buy-ins. If true, the impact on the many and varied Australian artists and writers whose work presently features on RN programs will be significant.

Some of the money RN saves from its cuts will be used to establish a Creative Audio Unit which will develop and draw from outside the ABC material for RN, and also Online. The amount and balance of resources which remains available for radio content will be critical, as will be the maintenance of RN's high standards. Increased opportunities the unit is intended to provide for public input may result in wonderful, innovative contributions. They might also result in uninspiring content from aspiring contributors being accepted by the ABC as a cheap way to fill airtime and web space.

What the ABC says

Despite the quality of programming depending heavily on the number and experience of staff and the time to make programs, ABC management expects ABC audiences to believe that cutting the essential ingredients will have no impact at all.

As was ever thus, management seeks to present the cuts to Radio National as not cuts at all. Rather, they are wonderful new, fresh changes, in which nothing will be lost, but instead, reflected somewhere else or in a different way.

What others say

Dr Siobhán McHugh, an award-winning oral historian, writer and documentary-maker, says "Underfunded as it is, RN is precious, as are

its best producers". McHugh fears the result of RN changes may be a more superficial treatment of ideas, and that "highly textured, well researched programs which are produced with insight, authenticity, inventive sound design and general élan" will be lost.

Tom Morton, a former RN journalist and presenter, said the features unit will be "losing people who represent a very large part of the intellectual capital and experience at Radio National . . . potentially ripping the guts out of the whole culture of features, documentary making and drama".

What FABC says

Radio National, the heart of the ABC's intellectual and cultural broadcasting, is being eroded to save \$1 million next year. RN's downgrade is also the result of ABC management's priority to resource populist television programming in the absence of the ABC having sufficient funds for all of its services.

Act to save Radio National

Let the ABC Board know that you will not accept the ABC abandoning its Charter responsibilities to inform, educate, promote the performing arts, reflect Australian cultural diversity and contribute to a sense of national identity.

Let your local Member of Parliament know that in the forthcoming Federal Budget you expect the Government to fund the national broadcaster so that it can meet *all* of its charter responsibilities.

More information at
www.fabc.org.au



The good news for science fans is that in 2013 Robyn Williams' *Ockham's Razor* will return to a set, regular time, 7.45 am on Sundays

Who killed documentary? by Trevor Graham

Australian documentary makers have always had it tough. But there were once rewards.

Our documentary work was considered among the best in the world. We produced documentaries about compelling contemporary social issues - films about the work of socially motivated eye surgeon Fred Hollows (*For All the World to See*, 1993); or the struggles of other international heroes, such as East Timor's former president Jose Ramos-Horta (*The Diplomat*, 2000) and, in my own case, native title champion Eddie Koiki Mabo (*Mabo: Life of an Island Man*, 1997).

"Australia used to be at the forefront," proclaimed Bob Connolly at the annual Australian International Documentary Conference. Connolly, award winner with *Rats in the Ranks* (1996) and *Mrs Carey's Concert* (2010), continued passionately, about the transformation of "our industry, concerned with artistry and high endeavour, into a sausage factory, turning out, with some very honourable exceptions, what can only be described as fodder. We as an industry are busily engaged in eliminating the concept of art."

So what's happened? Who killed our long tradition of socially engaged storytelling?

It was our two public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, and the current administration at Screen Australia, the federal government's screen-funding agency.

If you need proof, knock on the door of the documentary commissioning editor team at either public broadcaster. Try presenting them with today's equivalent social-issue stories to those of Mabo, Ramos-Horta or Hollows. Try convincing them to buy a story on one of the most divisive environmental issues of our times, climate change. You'd be laughed at. Shown the door.

Public broadcasters now compete with commercial broadcasters for ratings. And here's the rub: to compete in the television market, our public broadcasters want series, not stand-alone documentaries.

The one-off documentary is akin to the authored novel. It's one crack at an audience. There's no next instalment. And it used to be regular, weekly TV fare on SBS and the ABC.

Now, the factual television series is all the vogue and the figures speak for themselves. In 2009, 50 per cent of documentaries commissioned by the ABC were single documentaries. By this year, series accounted for 70 per cent of ABC commissions, with fewer than 14 hours of one-offs.

It's even more diabolical at SBS. One has to ask, where is the 'public' in 'public broadcasting' over the past few years of SBS programming? What does *Top Gear Australia* have to do with SBS's charter responsibility to "inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society"?



So Help Me God ABC documentary crew in Campbell Town Magistrates Court, Sydney 1992

A top-notch Australian one-off documentary will engage, entertain and educate audiences, and trigger water-cooler discussions the next day. They bring Australian life, hopes, dreams, heroes and ordinary folk to our screens, and are part of our national family album.

They help put the 'public' into 'public broadcasting', by holding up a mirror to our life as a nation.

The move to factual series radically cuts across the values of diversity. We now have fewer stories from fewer producers. The breadth and depth of stories and storytelling is vastly reduced. This undermines the democratic nature of many voices and leaves one questioning the values of public broadcasters in Australia.

By way of example, try proposing to the ABC stories about the many problems facing rural Australia. The answer will be: "We've done that mate! *Country Town Rescue*." Yes, they have done it and it was a fine series of eight half-hour programs. But what it also did was replace the resources of a potential four one-hour programs, four different stories from four different rural or regional communities across Australia.



ABC documentary *Nobody's Children*: David Goldie (producer/director) and Marc Spicer (cameraman) underneath a train, 1989

There is strong anecdotal evidence that the drive to factual series production above the one-off documentary is driven not by programmers at our national broadcasters, but by their marketing departments, which get more bang for their marketing buck with a series lasting four to six weeks.

Being relevant to a national audience isn't just about ratings numbers. It's about debate, engagement, ideas, and seeking out a multitude of stories, from every nook and cranny, the unusual, the unknown, the exotic, the madcap. This requires editorial imagination, vision, courage, confidence and leadership.

It's time Screen Australia and our public broadcasters reclaimed their responsibility to promote a diversity of views through factual stories and to nurture Australian documentary makers of our time.

Trevor Graham is a documentary maker of 30 years. He is the former co-chairman of the Australian International Documentary Conference and a former commissioning editor at SBS TV. An unedited version of his article can be viewed at www.screenhub.com.au/news/shownewsarticleG.php?newsID=44547



The ABC's outsourcing of TV production to the private sector is destroying Australian documentary-making. ABC documentary programming must be returned to program makers by rebuilding the ABC's internal documentary-making capacity and buying the best that independent producers have produced.

Legislation for ABC Board passed

Members of Friends of the ABC are to be congratulated. No longer will governments be able to easily stack the ABC's governing board with mates and people opposed to independent public broadcasting.

FABC work over many years resulted in the Labor Government implementing a new merit-based appointment system for the ABC and SBS boards and introducing the National Broadcasting Legislation Amendment Bill.

The new broadcasting legislation will enshrine the new arms-length practice in law and restore the staff-elected director position to the ABC Board. The staff position had been abolished by the Howard government in 2006.

While FABC was unsuccessful in convincing the Government and Greens of the need to strengthen the legislation in some areas, the new system will nevertheless deliver a significant improvement on past practice.

Under the new system positions are advertised. Appointees are chosen by the Government from a short list prepared by an independent panel which conducts a merit selection process.

Except for former politicians and their senior staff, who can only be appointed after 12 months out of office, the Government can disregard the recommendations of the panel. But if it does, it is required to table reasons in the Parliament.

The legislation, opposed by the Coalition and supported by the Greens in the Senate, was carried by the Parliament in July and is expected to be proclaimed this year.



Quentin Dempster – journalist, author and ABC broadcaster – has declared he will stand for the staff director position

A word from FABC President – David Risstrom

ABC funding - time to act

This year is the ABC's 80th birthday. It is also a critical time for the ABC.

Negotiations are under way for the May Federal Budget, which will be the last before the Federal Election and determine ABC funding for the next three years.

The national broadcaster received a significant increase in the Rudd Labor Government's first Budget which addressed ABC funding. However, except for additional funding for television drama, which is now entirely

outsourced to private producers, most of the funding increase was for new initiatives, such as the children's television channel.

The past 26 years have seen the cost of broadcasting increase. The ABC has had to keep up to date with technological developments. It has met the changing needs of the community by introducing services like Online, 24-hour radio and TV news, and ABC iview which is the most watched television-program replay service in the country.

Yet ABC funding has declined. Operational funding has fallen in real terms from slightly

over \$1 billion in 1986 to \$800 million today. (Higher figures sometimes publicly quoted for ABC funding include funds provided to the ABC to purchase its transmission from a private provider since the Howard government sold Australia's national transmission network.)

From now until the Budget, let your federal Member of Parliament know:

- * you value the national public broadcaster for its independence and role of offering the nation culture, knowledge, information and ideas.
- * the ABC is an essential service. Its importance has grown due to the decline in quality and localism of Australia's mainstream commercial media and the danger to democracy which results from Australian commercial media ownership having become concentrated into the hands of so few people.
- * the ABC needs
 - increased funding to rebuild its existing excellent services and to innovate to remain relevant
 - a funding process that will ensure the public broadcaster is well-funded to meet its charter responsibilities, regardless of which party is in government
 - funding delivered in a manner which upholds the ABC's independence.

YOU can support the ABC by:

- * phoning, writing or visiting your Federal MP
- * joining a Friends of the ABC delegation to meet your local MP in their electorate. Please contact FABC office to learn more, or to let us know if you would consider accompanying us next year.

Friends Officers

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photo by Daniel Ruzeu

FABC Notices

Help FABC spread the word

What happens to the ABC should be of concern to every organisation and every person in the community. If you belong to any group – be it Probus, a parents group, U3A or the local branch of a political party – please suggest that Friends of the ABC be invited to speak about the importance of the ABC.