

News+Views

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What's happening to the ABC in C21

Tim Bowden speaks

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Classic FM unfairly cut

Culture slipping down the ABC's agenda

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ABC unites Australia

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ABC endangered

Cuts now. More ahead.

The ABC and many of its services to the people of this country are being seriously damaged. The public broadcaster is being stripped of financial support. Its independence is being undermined. Its key resource of skilled and talented people is being slashed.

This process of destruction has only begun.

Cuts to the ABC's budget of \$254 million (4.6%) over 5 years were announced late last year – on top of funding the ABC lost when the Government terminated Australia Network and the ABC was forced to cut 72 staff. The cuts are set to begin low and escalate. The ABC estimates the accumulated loss in the latter years will be over eight per cent a year.

The cuts are an attack on the ABC. They far exceed the size of efficiency dividends imposed on any government department.

The list of ABC programs and services already cut will grow. Remaining programs will suffer in length, breadth and depth.

There will be even less in-house ABC production.

Smaller states will lose out as the broadcaster becomes more centralised. Traditional audiences will be neglected if the ABC favours the pursuit of younger audiences with its scarce resources.

The present Federal Coalition Government has abandoned its responsibility to the vast majority of Australians who value the ABC.

Its actions reflect the interests of those who seek the public broadcaster's demise – **Rupert Murdoch's News Corp**, which views the ABC as a competitor for audiences, and extreme conservative lobby groups like the **Institute of Public Affairs** that seek to have the **ABC privatised**.

The ABC needs YOUR help!

- 1** Prime Minister **Tony Abbott** recently promised to change for the better. **Malcolm Turnbull**, the Communications Minister who has inflicted huge cuts on the ABC, is waiting in the wings in case the PM should fall. Ask each of them what they will do to make good the Coalition's pre-election promise not to cut the ABC – to reverse the damage their Government has already done to the ABC and to stop more cuts ahead?
- 2** The **Labor Party** is developing policies for the next election. Ask what a Labor government would do to rebuild the ABC – both its domestic and international services?
- 3** Visit or write to your local federal **Member of Parliament**. Details of your MP at www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members or phone ABC Friends office. Let ABC Friends know if you would be willing to participate in an ABC Friends delegation to your MP.

**Numbers equal influence.
Urge colleagues and friends to join ABC Friends.**

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CUT

400 Jobs 100 staff gone and another 300 to go – close to 10% of the ABC's ongoing workforce.
TV sports broadcasts particularly non-national events
Classic FM
Lateline
Foreign Correspondent
Radio news bulletins and state news rooms
Regional radio
Specialisation cut Half of ABC Religion Unit staff moved to a general pool, continuing ABC management's push to break down specialist programming units.

AXED

State 7.30 editions
At the Movies
RN specialist programs –
Bush Telegraph
Hindsight
Encounter
Poetica
First Bite
Into the Music
360documentaries
By Design

SHUT DOWN

ABC South Australia TV production



Music disappearing from the ABC's repertoire

Mal Hewitt

The ABC's Charter requires it to "encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and performing arts in Australia." Other clauses refer to the ABC's contribution to a sense of national identity whilst reflecting our cultural diversity. These terms may be general, but they undoubtedly demand that the ABC takes a strongly pro-active role in encouraging and promoting music creation and performance across Australia.

This national challenge was clearly in the minds of the ABC's founding fathers, particularly Sir Charles Moses, because it was the ABC which founded, maintained and managed for over 50 years six symphony orchestras, a dance band and several professional choirs for the express purpose of broadcasting great music to the entire Australian population.

The ABC also commissioned, performed and broadcast works by Australian composers, established a national competition for young classical music performers, and played a vital and all-encompassing role in music education, especially for children. Years of cuts to funding mean that the ABC no longer does most of these things.

ABC Management appears to have applied the axe with unusual savagery to Classic FM in the most recent cuts – 25% of its staff have gone, most of those directly involved in programming (so much for Minister Turnbull's "back office" only claims). FM jazz programs have vanished, along with the new music program *New Music Up Late*.

On both Classic FM and RN, programs of daring or innovative new music seemed to be a particular target. 600 live broadcasts

of concerts and festivals by Australian performers and ensembles have been cut to 300. Weekly *Sunday Live* concerts, broadcasting mainly young performers and much new music from right across Australia have ceased completely. Broadcasts of outstanding concerts from Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Brisbane will become rare, or cease altogether. Classic FM provides the major source in Australia of broadcasts and recordings by Australian classical composers and performers, filling a gap which will never be filled by commercial broadcasters or recording companies.

Who is listening to Classic FM? With a weekly reach of 724,000 in 2013-14 in Australia's five largest cities (14m people), the audience is fairly evenly distributed from age 30 upwards: 30-39, 15%; 40-49, 15%; 50-59, 19%; 60 and above, 17% per decade. Largely absent are listeners under 30, but these figures do not reflect management's view that Classic FM's audience is entirely geriatric! And many commercial radio stations wouldn't mind having those figures.

- Celebrated conductors, instrumental and vocal soloists and ensembles who visit Australia are unanimous in their praise of Classic FM as in the forefront of broadcasters of Classical music around the world.
- Concerts and festivals in Australia reach a world audience, promoting Australian composers, music, performers and ensembles on a world stage.
- Classic FM's coverage of events such as the Townsville Chamber Music Festival,

Sydney and Melbourne International Piano Competitions, National Music Camp performances and many others enable every Australian, regardless of location, to share in these great music festivals.

- Presenters on Classic FM are renowned for their expertise, experience and authority, some of them being practising musicians (such as conductors Graham Abbott and Guy Noble), as well as broadcasters of vast experience (Margaret Throsby, Mairi Nicolson), and all play a vital role in educating the radio audience whilst remaining entertaining and informative.

We must seriously question the motives of ABC Management in targeting Classic FM, particularly as its stablemate Triple J has remained relatively untouched.

Is it victim of a 'dumbing down' process that can be identified across the ABC as resources are denied to programs which challenge the intellect?

Management must be reminded that the ABC is has a clear charter "to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and performing arts in Australia," as well as to educate the Australian people.

Classic FM has fulfilled this superbly, and must be adequately funded to enable it to continue doing so.

Mal Hewitt OAM has had a lifelong association educating and providing performing experience for young musicians. He is also President of ABC Friends (NSW).

Save our ABC, Adelaide



A street in Brisbane





Not again! Saving the ABC in the 21st century

Tim Bowden

Well, what a week it has been. Game on indeed for the future of the ABC – and complicated by the fact that some of the cuts are, not only in my view, self-inflicted wounds. But the main challenge for the moment is to protest against the Federal Governments unwanted, un-needed and dishonest cuts to the national broadcaster.

It would seem that the ABC is, according to Tony Abbott, also not playing for the Australian team.

I don't think that the ABC should be badged in this way, and it would be farcical if it were not serious. Our current Prime Minister, it seems, really believes that the ABC should forsake its traditional role to examine all issues with independent rigour – on behalf of all Australians – and is now seeking to punish the ABC (and SBS) by cutting funding.

The weasel pre-election words of Tony Abbott that he would not cut the funds of the ABC or the SBS were only a part of similar deceptions of his 'Government of no surprises' which of course came up with a raft of very unpleasant surprises indeed.

But I wish to dwell on the grave problems facing the ABC, whose budget has been cut, and trimmed further under the guise of efficiency reviews and a number of other more sneaky ways to attempt to bend the national broadcaster to the Coalition's will – like appointments to the ABC Board. Earlier this year we learned that there is now a mechanism (a Kevin Rudd initiative) to use an independent nomination process that was supposed to de-politicise the way board members to the ABC and SBS were selected. The 'independent' panel considers applications, then offers a shortlist of board candidates to the Minister for Communications and PM. Until recently it was overseen by Ian Watt, the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Two of the latest atrocities (among many) perpetrated on the ABC, were to appoint ex-Liberal MP Neil Brown to this committee, an ABC-hater of renown who is on record as wanting to break it up, sell it off and more besides, plus Janet Albrechtsen, a Murdoch columnist whose anti-ABC splenetic columns in *The Australian* have been unrelenting and who was a Board member herself from 2005 to 2010, appointed by the Coalition.

All positions on the panel expire by April next year, so it's not difficult to predict that the Abbott government can entirely remake the panel as it sees fit.

Scott has bent over backwards in recent years to set up fairness procedures, complaints handling mechanisms, and making sure that even barking-mad (and uniformly anti-ABC) members of Melbourne's uber-right Institute of Public Affairs cropped up regularly on programs like Q & A, as well as the likes of Piers Akerman and Andrew Bolt who had regular exposure on Sunday morning's *Insiders*.

When I first began writing this address, I contacted a senior source in ABC Radio National for some background. My informant said that in all his time at the ABC, he had never experienced such fear and loathing in the organisation, trying to plan ahead for the expected cuts whose scope and seriousness were still to be spelled out.

We now know that Radio National is to lose eight important programs – *Bush Telegraph*, *First Bite*, *By Design*, *360 Documentaries*, *Into the Music*, *Encounter*, *Poetica* and *Hindsight*.

This last one means a lot to me, as *Hindsight* is the remaining remnant of the Social History Unit which I started in 1985, and which has done really important documentary work on Australian history for the last 29 years, until the axe fell this week. The ABC will not be worth fighting for if it abandons its quality products on RN – among other unfortunate decisions like cutting State-based programs on television.

As Quentin Dempster put it so well in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Tuesday: "Radio National, with its specialist programs hitting 64 million downloads so far this year is being (quote unquote) 'reshaped'. A nincompoop in senior management has been heard to comment on 'the need to get rid of the stranglehold of specialisation'!!!!"

However none of this would be happening had the Abbott Government not lied about no cuts to the funding of ABC and SBS, and played into the hands of the Murdoch ABC hate squad who have been baying for the ABC's blood for years.

There is certainly no public perception that Aunty needs a makeover. Polls, as I mentioned, consistently show a very high level of satisfaction for the services Aunty provides Australians in television, radio and indeed online.

(Tim described his long and varied career with the ABC to illustrate his total familiarity with the organisation.)

As a public service broadcaster I wasn't paid all that much, but I loved the freedom of choosing topics not driven by a commercial imperative, and – with overtime not being an option – worked for as long as I had to, in order to get my programs on air. Most of my colleagues were doing the same thing. There were times when we felt we were poorly served by our managers, but this is the way it is in any large organisation.

I can assure you none of us felt we were running the place. We were running just to keep up with what we had to do.

I could quote examples of staff striking against blatant censorship of current affairs programs – sometimes initiated by ABC management itself. But staff never took industrial action over their pay and conditions. It was always over matters of principal involving the ABC's charter. There was, and still is, a great delight by ABC broadcasters to use the freedoms provided by a public broadcaster to pursue stories and topics that shine a light on our own society, political, social and cultural. And our listeners and viewers seem to like it this way. Believe me there is no sinister agenda. Basically the ABC is quite a conservative organisation.

But not conservative enough for the Coalition. Doubtless John Howard hoped that when he appointed his close friend Donald McDonald as Chairman of the ABC for ten years from 1996, probably hoped that he would reign in the perceived radicals – but McDonald is a civilised and cultured man and while not completely captured by the culture of the ABC (let's not forget it was McDonald who unleashed the unspeakable Jonathan Shier briefly as its MD) he allowed most of its flowers to bloom.

Now the Coalition has taken board stacking to new heights with this latest ploy, bringing Albrechtsen back into the fray with Neil Brown to presumably nominate the next batch of crazies to be inflicted on poor old Aunty from within.

(Continued on page 4)

This is an edited extract of a longer and entertaining address with many anecdotes that was given by Tim Bowden to an ABC Friends (Vic) public meeting November 28, 2014. The full address is at www.abcfriends.org.au/events.html

ABC unites Australia



On National Mosque Open Day last year the ABC hosted an hour of live radio in a Werribee mosque. Guests on the multi-faith broadcast included the local imam and the president of the National Council of Jewish Women. *Radioinfo* reported that ABC presenters (photo below) Waleed Aly (left) and Rafael Epstein (right) were treated like rock stars, with people lining up to have their photo taken with them after the show.



ABC Friends

ABC Friends is a national campaign. It comprises ABC Friends and Friends of the ABC organisations across Australia.

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Feedback on ABC programs and services:
www.abc.net.au/contact

Locate your federal politician at
www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members



Testing
Grounds
bar at
Southbank
supports
the ABC.

(Continued from page 3)

Not again!

Saving the ABC in the 21st century

I never cease to be amazed by the visceral hatred of the national broadcaster by the ABC's right wing critics. In July 2002 – when we were all much younger – I addressed the Brisbane Institute, and my talk was titled *Managing the ABC – Mission Impossible?* I began by saying:

When the appalling Jonathan Shier was finally sent packing last November by the same ABC board that had appointed him, the baying of the hounds of the right entered the realm of the theatre of the absurd.

By the way, let's not forget the Mansfield Review, which took place over 1996 and 1997, and a classic case of the old adage that no government should set up an inquiry unless it can predict the outcome that it wants – or words to that effect.

Senator Alston (and Howard) miscalculated badly on this front. Bob Mansfield was a marketing man, and called for submissions from the public on what should happen to the ABC. He received, as I understand it, some 10,500 submissions, 10,000 of which were essentially saying that the writers approved of what the ABC was doing, and wanted more of the same. Mansfield's conclusion was essentially that the ABC was doing a great job, and should be given more money!

Suffice to say the Coalition never made that mistake again. The Mansfield Report was quietly shelved – and their cuts stayed in place.

Enough history. But, of course, it is all happening again.

I'd like to reiterate the point that reducing the effectiveness of the ABC to perform the functions it does, and generally appreciated by its large nation-wide audience, it would be unwise to think that all conservative members of parliament would welcome the results of further budget cuts.

National Party is already kicking and screaming about cuts to the ABC's services to the bush, including five regional centres. What did they think was going to happen when their members in Cabinet voted for the present cuts? It is now being suggested by the likes of the National's Senator Ian MacDonald that this has been a deliberate act of bastardry by the ABC to put pressure on the Government. The cuts had to be spread across the board.

Bashing the ABC, or attempting to muzzle its freedoms, is actually not electorally sensible. In my view, most Australians would take an extremely dim view of that perception. At the moment, the ABC and indeed SBS needs all the friends it can get.

So as I said at the beginning, it is game on for public broadcasting as we know it and want it. Let's maintain the rage, keep this issue high in the minders of voters to make sure we can keep public broadcasting as it should be.