

# background briefing

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friends  
of the abc

## In for the long haul

When Senator Nick Minchin on election night shared with the ABC audience his realisation that the Coalition could control the Senate, a chill would have struck to the hearts of friends of the ABC. With the power to pass any legislation it wants through the Senate, the Howard government can alter the ABC Act. It can formulate a new Charter; it can direct or enable it to accept advertising; it can privatise the public broadcaster.

In its policy statement before the last election, the Coalition said: *"The Coalition also remains committed to the current ABC Act prohibitions on advertising and sponsorship."* But we remember the speedy shifting to the non-core basket of its promise before 1996 to maintain ABC funding.

The media ownership laws will certainly be changed. The winners will be Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer, and the losers will be media diversity and press independence. This is at a time when press freedom has already been significantly eroded, when there is little serious political analysis in the media and policies are inadequately scrutinised. The need for an independent ABC is greater than it has ever been - but Mr Howard may not see it that way.

Meanwhile the ABC finesses its performance of the pre-emptive buckle.\* ABC Enterprises has given politicians the right to veto sale of their own video footage to outside film-makers; ABC management imposed a six month period of external monitoring leading to the election; and we have been told by more than one insider that self-censorship in reporting is not uncommon. The new draft code of conduct for ABC employees forbids them to speak in public or write articles without managerial permission. ABC Radio demands that staff in news and current affairs declare their political affiliation and membership of political organizations. The ABC seems intent on neutering itself before the government does.

Sharpen your quills or boot up the computer. Your list for letters of protest should include: the PM, the Minister, the Chairman, the Managing Director and the Press. And near the top of the list should be the Nationals, who have generally been good friends to the ABC.

### \*Theory of the pre-emptive buckle

Back in the 1970s an ABC broadcaster outlined what he called "the theory of the pre-emptive buckle". This theory, which sought to explain the strange behaviour of some ABC managers, went like this:

After years of punishment ABC managers have developed a keenly honed sense of when the government is about to clobber them. Their instinct for self preservation asserts itself and they practice the fine art of falling in a heap before they are attacked, thus minimizing injury. DC

Go to page 9 to find addresses of those to write to and some suggestions for effective protest.

Cartoon thanks to CPSU magazine *The Works*

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People concerned about an independent media in Australia should be wary of attempts to privatise the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the former chief justice of the Family Court Alastair Nicholson said.

Speaking at a meeting of the Friends of the ABC in Melbourne, Mr Nicholson said privatisation of the national broadcaster was not unthinkable. But he said it was more likely the ABC would first be commercialised, and later sold to private interests.

the Howard government would regard itself as advantaged by the demise of the ABC

Mr Nicholson warned there was a campaign by some government ministers to destroy the ABC, which he described as the last bastion of truly independent media in Australia.

He said the sale of the ABC into private hands was "a truly appalling prospect" and its destruction would be a blow for democracy in Australia. "From a purely political point of view, the Howard government would regard itself as advantaged by the demise of the ABC."

"That would remove at one stroke the most significant source of independent comment about the performance of the Government in Australia. It would enable the Government to exercise unparalleled dominance over the electronic media and effectively silence criticism without acting overtly to do so. The consequences for democracy in this country would be catastrophic. The problem is that this Government has not shown itself to be particularly concerned about issues of principle where it sees a political advantage to be gained. Nor has it shown itself to be tolerant of those who criticise it."

Mr Nicholson said he expected there would be more compliant appointments to the board of the ABC now the Howard government had been re-elected. "This is not a Government that takes the risk of appointing persons with an independent mind to any significant position. We can also expect the usual and perhaps increased attempts to interfere with its independence that we have seen in the past."

[ED: SEE 'CAMPAIGN FOR AN INDEPENDENT BOARD' p9]

Mr Nicholson said supporters of the ABC could also expect "a continuation of the sort of financial attrition that has occurred since 1996". He said control of the Senate had given the government the power to act as it pleases to "reform" the ABC.

Mr Nicholson also despaired for the future of the commercial print and electronic media, which he said had become concentrated in the hands of too few proprietors.

The Age 12nov04

### THE ABC NEEDS FRIENDS!

In his speech Alistair Nicholson highlighted the importance of an independent ABC and he went on to ask the question which in the present climate should be uppermost in our minds: "How we can best preserve it?"

His answer was in effect a call to Friends of the ABC to rally, as we have done in the past.

"I do not pretend to have the answers but I think it is obvious that one way is to place pressure on Government to clarify its future intentions for the ABC, to lobby individual members of Parliament in support of the ABC and to bring to public attention the dangers and the prospects that would face us in its absence. This organisation is well placed to do that and its importance is even greater than it has been in the past in the present situation. I wish that I had other solutions, but I do not believe that they exist.

"The fact that we still live in a democracy, albeit an imperfect one, does leave a glimmer of hope. The destruction of the ABC would do much to extinguish it."

JL

#### Early shot from the Right

"I think there are a number of programs where the government could well afford to butt out. A lot of the research of anti-social sort of thought...even the ABC has perhaps outlived the reason for government funding it now.

I mean, there's just so many alternative views and forums and media out there, I don't understand why the state is funding the ABC, but the inevitable tendency to the unrepresentative left that government funding almost always seems to encourage."

Andrew Bolt *Counterpoint Radio National 18oct04*



Cartoon courtesy of Michael Atchison

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## Goodbye to independent press if Howard has his way

A press freedom index, rating 167 countries, has seen Australia decline from 12th position two years ago to 41st place today.

A recent study released by *Reporters Sans Frontieres* identifies economic pressures as one of the factors that reduces the autonomy and independence of journalists.

The report FREEDOM OF THE PRESS doesn't stop there.

Its press freedom index, rating 167 countries, has seen Australia decline from 12th position two years ago to 41st place today. Its look at the constraints on the Australian press makes for disturbing reading.

The study cites the legal bullying of journalists and, in some cases, their detention and arrest just for doing their job. It condemns the treatment dished out to journalists who were expelled by government security guards at Woomera, there to cover a hunger strike by 300 asylum seekers desperate to bring world attention to their plight.

Not surprisingly, the report is concerned with attempts by the Howard Government to relax cross-media ownership laws. The report argues that easing these restrictions poses a threat to press freedom and diversity. "These measures were partly designed to satisfy Australia's two press magnates, Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer," it says.

When Paul Keating abolished cross-media ownership laws back in 1987, Fairfax was the loser and, if Packer gets his hands on it, it will surely be the loser again.

Packer has made no secret of his interest in Fairfax. Indeed, he had an almost 15 per cent share that he sold for \$436 million three years ago.

The Packer stable, Publishing & Broadcasting Limited, owns Channel Nine, with its television licences giving it a reach of almost 52%, and has a 40% market share of top-selling magazines. PBL did a deal with Microsoft and launched the successful *Ninemsn* and has a 33% interest in Sky News. Both Packer and Murdoch have a 25% share of Foxtel.

Rupert and Kerry might be good blokes, but do we really want two men deciding what we see, read, hear and think about? Despite the rhetoric that says abolishing cross-media ownership will encourage new players, this is a game that only a few can play and first in line must be Packer and Murdoch.

Trish Bolton *The Age* 1nov04

Since it came to office in 1996 the Howard Government has tried four times to change the laws controlling cross-media ownership. When it was clear that the Coalition had control of the Senate, one of the first things ministers flagged was reintroduction of that legislation. Now it is a certainty to succeed.

In addition, the media is failing to put election policies under scrutiny, as in the recent election. Nor was there any attempt to assess the government's record. *See below.*

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## Politics of fear and favour - and the uncritical endorsement of the media

In this nine months long election campaign, there have been two pervasive, expensive and ultimately dominant ideas. They are ideas that they been poorly defined by the media, despite the implications they carry for the future- regardless of who wins.

The first idea, the ever present theme throughout the campaign, is summed up by the phrase national security.

The second idea might be summed up in the American usage of the word entitlements: the unprecedented level of vote buying from both sides in this campaign has legitimised an underlying idea, often implied, more rarely stated, that voters, particularly in marginal seats or among key interest groups, are *entitled* to the leaders' bribes.

Mark Latham in his announcement of (non- means tested) Medicare Gold was unusually candid when he said ALL our senior citizens deserved special attention. John Howard was more careful in choosing his words, but his spending promises spoke emphatically in support of middle class entitlement.

Billions of dollars in family benefits, Medicare subsidies, and child care subsidies were announced, all targeted at key middle income or above voter groups, who could swing the election.

Assistance to the poor was generally an afterthought.

The strength of both of these ideas was in their bipartisan support, and the unthinking endorsement they received in the media.

Preoccupied with the daily simplifications of the Howard - Latham tennis match, and increasingly excited by the possibility of a Latham win, the media gave little serious analysis to the incoherence of the policies on national security.

*Extracts from an article, The Politics of Fear and Favour, by Max Suich in The Age 11nov04*

Remember this when next you hear the ABC attacked as an example of 'middle class welfare'. And clearly a shortage of money cannot be used as an excuse to withhold funding from the ABC. JL

## Walking both sides of the street

*It seems that ABC chairman Donald McDonald deeply resents the backhander he received from Labor leader Mark Latham during the federal election campaign. At an ABC book launch on 12oct04 McDonald said he found Latham's remarks about the need to appoint an independent board at the ABC very insulting.*

McDonald considers that in standing up to former Communications Minister Senator Richard Alston over eight years of sustained hostility he has demonstrated his own independence, particularly after he withstood intense pressure from Alston, Treasurer Peter Costello and then ABC board member Michael Kroger not to dispense with the services of Jonathan Shier as managing director of the ABC. Shier, who replaced Brian Johns, proved (on McDonald's own public admission) to be a disastrous appointment, embroiling the ABC in front page controversy for two years until McDonald had to move against him in the weeks before the 2001 federal election.

While McDonald may have redeemed himself to some extent on protecting the ABC's 'independence' when personally pushed, he and Balding now seem to have an established pattern of walking both sides of the street. This pattern does not demonstrate 'independence'. It reveals political calculation. We insiders watch this process with considerable bemusement.

Example one: Balding's unprecedented decision to establish 24-hour Rehome monitoring of bias and balance from the May federal budget to the issuing of the election writs, over the loud objections of staff elected director Ramona Koval. Koval publicly revealed the existence of a letter to the chairman from director Maurice Newman, who seemed to be moved by private suggestions from a former Alston staffer seeking external monitoring of ABC bias.

Balding denied any connection and rejects any interpretation that the Rehome monitoring was designed to intimidate journalists into self-censorship when reporting the activities of the government. Balding says a rigorous accountability régime will protect, not diminish, the ABC's independence.

Example two: The disingenuous decision not to simulcast the Howard-Latham live TV debate on 12 September. Balding explained: 'By presenting the program at 10 pm, rather than simultaneously with Channel Nine at 7.30 pm, the ABC has ensured the program will be available to the widest possible audience.' Re-broadcasting the debate at 10 pm on the ABC outside prime time actually substantially diminished the available audience and could be seen as a political advantage to the incumbent government.

Example Three: Balding's backing of a decision by Robyn Watts, the director of enterprises, denying a documentary maker's access to contentious news footage on the basis that it would be used for an 'advocacy or cause'. The documentary *Punished Not Protected* concerned the well canvassed government policy on asylum seekers and detention centres.

Balding's door has been closed to a staff deputation seeking to debate the decision with him and seeking to have decisions about such matters returned to ABC Archives under long standing use arrangements.

Example Four: An ABC Radio requirement in October that staff must complete a disclosure statement revealing any personal political affiliation or party membership. 'Disclosures must be made where there is an actual, perceived or potential conflict of interest.' Listed among the potential conflicts of interest: 'Memberships of or relationships with political organisations'. A copy of a gossip column item on this by Amanda Meade in *The Australian's* media section (7 October) was conspicuously absent from the ABC's internal daily news clippings website.

Balding has yet to respond to complaints about ABC Radio's intrusion into individual privacy. One wag has suggested that the entire 4,000 staff of the ABC should now join and form the Ultimo branch of the Liberal Party. *Reductio ad absurdum.*

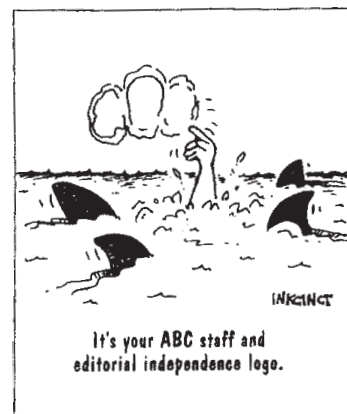
The ABC's funding and future is now in the hands of the re-elected Howard Government and its Communications Minister. The Coalition's 2004 election policy was for a formal funding review of 'the adequacy' of funding to the ABC, but with the rider that current levels of funding would be maintained in real terms until the expiry of the triennium (2006).

The government has been under pressure from News Ltd to reduce the capacity of the ABC in Australia to the marginalised and sponsored PBS in the United States.

We inside the ABC expect Howard to deliver to Murdoch and Packer on media policy following their strong editorial support for the government through the 2004 election campaign. If the government indicates an acceptance of their push to marginalise the ABC through the promised funding review we may get yet another demonstration of Donald McDonald's capacity to fight for the ABC's independence and survival as a viable mainstream public broadcaster. McDonald's ten year term as ABC chairman expires in July 2006. Based on his performance as managing director to date we expect Russell Balding (contract term five years from 2002) to simply follow his chairman's lead.

Larry Larcordaire  
[www.newmatilda.com](http://www.newmatilda.com)  
20oct04

Friends of the ABC can receive a 20% discount on subscriptions to New Matilda if you quote 'friendsabc' when subscribing.



Cartoon courtesy  
INKINCT

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## The Men and Women in the Iron Mask

There was a time, in newspaper and in broadcast journalism, when 'objectivity' was equated with anonymity. ABC announcers, as the people we used to hear speaking on the wireless were called, were not permitted to reveal their names, or any personal information about themselves. In the newspapers bylines were rare. Newspaper articles were written by anonymous 'staff writers', 'industrial reporters' or 'correspondents'.

It was a little like the rationale for dressing barristers and judges in wigs and gowns – it depersonalized them and added to the impression that neither the courts nor the media were made up of fallible human beings.

While the wigs and gowns have mostly remained in our courts, broadcasters now talk rather than announce, and many are public figures. The more we see them on television, hear them on radio, or read opinion pieces by them in the press, the better we are able to make an assessment of them.

### The ABC has been bullied and it is running scared

It might seem paradoxical, but the ABC is simultaneously seeking to cover up one side of their staff while seeking to expose the other. It might seem like a paradox, but I don't think it is. The ABC has been bullied, and it is running scared.

In its new draft Code of Conduct, the ABC is seeking to restrict the right of its staff to exercise their civil rights – rights to make public comment on controversial political and social issues. If this succeeds, it will mask the ABC staff, and make it more difficult for us, the audience, to know who they really are.

This seems to be based on the idea that being fair, balanced and impartial means having no opinion. Such people are rare in journalism. Lack of an opinion is often, but not always, the result of ignorance. Similarly, informed people are sometimes, but not always, opinionated.

The requirement that ABC staff behave fairly should not mean that they can have no opinions, or, worse still, that they may have opinions but they must conceal them from us. The public has a right to know.

On the other hand, the public right to know seems to be at the basis of another controversial proposal from the ABC – those ABC staff members should declare if they belong to a political party. Is the ABC not justified in this stand, on the basis of the public's right to know?

In principle there is a case for this. In practice, such a requirement tells us too little. Parliamentary parties represent only a limited gamut of opinion. There are other significant political, social, religious organisations that are relevant. To confine this disclosure to membership of registered political parties is to distort the information. Very few ABC staff belong to political parties for fear of being typecast – but a lot of them have political opinions. The effect of such an edict would simply be for the few staff who do belong to political parties to formally resign, but retain their connections and opinions, behind a mask.

Ultimately, such provision would mask, not reveal. Truth does not come from anonymity, a horsehair wig or a silk gown, but from robust and open debate.

Darce Cassidy

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## Free speech gag

*According to the code: "...employees must not make any public comment ...unless this is part of normal work or specifically approved by the relevant executive director."*

"It's an attempt to gag free speech," says the CPSU's ABC Section Secretary Graeme Thomson. "Management appear to have forgotten that the loyalty of ABC audiences is based on the broadcaster being independent and thought-provoking. To remain vital, interesting and energetic, the ABC must attract and retain people who really know about society, religion and politics. It's unreasonable to expect that these people park their brains at the door and remain mute on issues that affect and interest them," said Mr Thomson.

The proposed code also attempts to control what employees do in their own time. It says: "*An employee's personal behaviour outside of work must not interfere with their performance of official duties or reflect on the standing or integrity of the corporation.*"

ABC staff are asking just who is going to decide what sort of behaviour is acceptable and how it reflects on the ABC.

"So much of the document is woolly," Mr Thomson said.

"This lack of precision means that the document is likely to be applied unfairly and inconsistently.

"If the code is allowed to become ABC policy it would have implications for people such as Phillip Adams who, in addition to working for ABC, is a columnist for *The Australian* newspaper. Other ABC personalities who make public comments, speak at rallies, write articles or take part in debates would also be affected.

"It appears to be another part of a general drive to make the ABC workforce more compliant. I believe it is directly related to the sustained criticism of the ABC by the Howard government."

*The Works journal of the CPSU spring04*

The draft code states: 'While the ABC respects employees' rights to freedom of speech, this right must be exercised in a way that does not jeopardize the ABC's reputation, independence and integrity.'

Surely that is just what the new code is doing – bringing the ABC into disrepute. JL

## Not happy, Russell

### Audiences left out in the cold

There are a lot of unhappy viewers and listeners out here. We have lost shows and programs which we love and we can't understand why these programs are being taken off air or shifted around.

If audiences are being consulted or even considered we can't see any evidence of it.

*George Negus Tonight* has gone. *Gardening Australia* is no longer to be produced from Tasmania and is being moved to Saturday at 6.30pm. Radio National's *The Buzz* seems to have been dumped and Alan Saunders' *The Comfort Zone* is to be subsumed into a 'flow program' on Saturday mornings hosted by Geraldine Doogue (whom some of us are still missing from *Life Matters*). Classic FM listeners who once woke on Sunday mornings to the glorious music of *For the God who sings* were furious when Kay McLellan's program was moved to the desolate slot of 10.30 to 12.30pm.

Were we given credible reasons for these changes?

Was George Negus happy that his show has been axed? Was Peter Cundall delighted that the production of *Gardening Australia* was leaving his home state of Tasmania after 15 years? ABC Publicity would have us believe so. But it doesn't sound likely and we have learnt it isn't true.

Negus came out guns blazing across the media, declaring it stupid to end a show that was working. And Cundall, as recently as yesterday, was leading an ABC staff protest in Hobart, whose television industry is built around *Gardening Australia*. Happy and delighted the two old ABC warhorses are not. 1

So why does the ABC put out publicity statements which are misleading and obscurantist, which make the original decisions look dubious?

The ABC's first press release last Wednesday – which announced Negus had been dumped without mentioning his name – was prompted by a call to Levy from an ABC reporter based in Tasmania who was filing a story on *Gardening Australia* leaving the island state.

Levy and publicity head Lesna Thomas issued a second statement on "ABC TV program changes". This one claimed Cundall was "delighted" and the staff were "excited". Levy was quoted as saying "the objective of this decision is to provide quality regional content, produced by the regions, and presented by regional hosts, to show the diversity of Australia to all Australians".

But this, too, backfired and led to more negative publicity, as the statement included a comment about Negus and his claims of increasing the ratings.

"Reports that GNT 'tripled and almost quadrupled the 6.30pm ratings in 2 1/2 years' are not correct. The average household share for GNT was 10.8 per cent (440,000 people). By comparison, the average household share for

repeat British comedies in that slot has been as high as 21 per cent (1,050,000 people)." 1

The comment on ratings was not exactly honest, as George Negus had compared GNT's ratings not with British comedies in the same time slot but with GNT's forerunner, the ill-fated *Dimensions*, and his comparison was fair.

We have the feeling the wool has been pulled over our eyes and that the opinions and feelings of the ABC audiences count for little when program decisions are being made.

#### AUDIENCES, RATINGS AND QUALITY PROGRAMMING

A certain television and radio network has been mulling over the direction it should take. It agonises over

"the danger of being too earnest". There's a need, apparently, for the broadcaster to be "careful about being too cerebral and worthy". Providing "provocative" television appears to be a problem, with some material suggesting "consumers are happy to relax, be entertained or informed, but few turn on to be provoked". 2

No, it's *not* the ABC – for more on the decline and decline of SBS see page 8 – but it might well be, as quality programs make way for 'flow programming' or are shifted to a graveyard slot.

To give an idea what going with the flow means take the example of Geraldine Doogue's 'flow program' on Saturday morning RN which will replace or absorb three high quality, specialist programs and casually cover some of the topics from those programs. The arts program *In the deep end* at 8.30pm weekdays on RN is another example.

One of the programs destined to go is Alan Saunders' *The Comfort Zone* which

"takes in design, architecture, gardens, lifestyle and food. The mellifluous Saunders brings an authoritative, worldly presence to the melange and you have to wonder whether his specific skills and specialist knowledge will be lost in the flow." 3



Alan Saunders of *The Comfort Zone*

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The other two to go are *The Buzz* and *Earthbeat*. With the removal of *The Buzz* (which features the latest in technology) and *Earthbeat* (environmental news) RN bins two more excellent programs whose subject matter is not covered in any other specialist program.

“To be blunt, flow programs – featuring single, non-specialist presenters rambling and flowing here, then there – often aren’t all that compelling. In attempting to subsume TCZ, *Earthbeat* and Asia Pacific Highlights into another radio genre, RN has very probably got it wrong. Much could be lost in the translation. In any case, there’s precious little wrong with the Saturday morning line-up as it is.”<sup>3</sup>

Let’s not forget that the ABC Charter charges the Corporation with the responsibility “to provide a

balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs”.

The ABC in general speaks to a more discriminating audience than those satisfied with the commercial networks. And within that audience are groups passionate about particular quality programs that may not rate highly. Quality programs such as *The Comfort Zone* and *For the God who sings* set a benchmark of excellence. And if you lose the groups who love them you lose some of the most passionate defenders of the ABC.

Joan Laing

1 Amanda Meade *The Australian* 4nov04

2 Errol Simper *The Australian* 16oct03

3 Errol Simper *The Australian* 4nov04

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## The God who Sings is Silenced

Kay McLennan, presenter for many years of *For The God Who Sings* on ABC Classic FM, is retiring soon from the ABC after 25 years of outstanding service. This follows the bone-headed decision by ABC ‘management’ to transfer her long-running and popular program from accessible Sunday mornings to, ludicrously, the dog-hours on Sunday nights.

Kay’s resignation is one of the saddest reflections on our national broadcaster. A significant, dedicated audience has been discarded.

Kay and her program seem to have been considered dispensable because ‘managers’ saw them as ‘specialised’. But the scope of FTGWS extended beyond the rich tradition of sacred music. Choristers of all kinds and persuasions were inspired by offerings and linking commentary from an informed, fellow practitioner, and by the encouragement Kay provided for Australian performers and composers.

In addition to her weekly programs, Kay did a magnificent job with extended, special programs on the great Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter, and with a memorable CD.

I no longer bother to tune to Classic FM, and fear, if rumours have substance, that some of the magnificent specialist programs that give edge to Radio National may come under similar threat by ‘absorption’ into ‘flow programming’.

Peter Pockley, Distinguished science writer and broadcaster 5nov04

*With the retirement of Kay McLennan, the ABC is losing one of its outstanding broadcasters, writes John Bowan, President of the Sydney University Graduate Choir.*

Kay delivered a unique and outstanding service to lovers of choral music and the large community of choral singers in Australia. For fifteen years, her program, *For the God who Sings*, was an indispensable start to Sunday for many people, with its in-depth presentations of great music by composers and vocal groups not regularly heard elsewhere on the radio.

The program was of great interest to people of a religious persuasion, of course, but it appealed also to a wider audience. *For the God who Sings* in effect fulfilled the function of a community meeting point for choirs and choral singers throughout Australia. Kay did a wonderful job of presenting and promoting Australian singers, ensembles, conductors and musicians and providing information about choral concerts, festivals, symposia and other events around the country.

For all lovers of choral music, it was therefore a major disappointment when, earlier this year, *For the God who Sings* was shifted without consultation or justification to a highly unsuitable timeslot late on Sunday nights.

Kay’s radio personality was a vital part of her program’s success. She was invariably lively, interesting, enthusiastic, and entertaining (never more so than when the ABC’s technology played up or the weather reports failed to come in!). She represented the best in quality broadcasting, and never engaged in the dumbing down which is increasingly prevalent on the air waves. The Sydney University Graduate Choir would like to salute and thank Kay McLennan for her wonderful contribution to broadcast music in Australia and wish her all the best for the future.

5nov04

When Classic FM moved FTGWS from 6am to 10.30pm they would have lost most of its audience. If you are listening at 6am you will be tucked up by 10.30. Loyal listeners were outraged at the change.

We should say that Kay McLennan’s FTGWS is silenced, for it continues in its new time slot in the hands of respected presenter Stephen Watkins.

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## How SBS lost its way

Or how the SBS turned over its staff and changed direction. *Senator Nick Minchin, please take note – it all began with a few 'tasteful ads'.*

In *The Australian* 28oct04 Errol Simper wrote about the fall of SBS from a public broadcasting ethos.

When SBS's creative director for the past decade, John Stahel, left the building for the last time on September 24 about 170 staff gathered to accord him a standing ovation. There were obviously admirers extremely sorry to see the back of Stahel, 52, who'd first joined SBS as a cameraman back in 1985. Equally, there were many who undoubtedly used their applause as a protest.

### new dumb, brash direction

They were, between the lines - subliminally - telling SBS's board and management they don't like the new, dumb, brash direction the formerly up-market station is taking.

They were effectively saying they didn't enjoy seeing yet another of the old guard from SBS's classier days leave the building. Such protest is understandable. SBS has, after all, lost some impressive, competent stalwarts during the past couple of years: Peter Cavanagh, Rod Webb, Craig Collie, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton come fairly readily to mind. The latest, of course, is the head of news and current affairs, Phil Martin.

All the above-mentioned departees were important in the overall SBS scheme of things. But you could venture no valedictory was more crucial than that of Cavanagh, the network's former head of television, now successfully heading Radio New Zealand. Though he'd arrived from Southern Cross commercial television, Cavanagh had earlier had a long stint at the ABC and had a fair bit of time for SBS's then public broadcasting-oriented, cultural idealism and for its charter. His abrupt, totally unheralded 2002 resignation occurred because, in short, he didn't like some of the more commercial directions and philosophies he was encountering. He also believed an internal management restructure had made the television division more vulnerable to editorial interference.

### station's descent into a crass commercial mind-set

There are now close students of SBS - of its programming, its promotional image, its charter adherence - inclined to date the station's descent into a crass commercial mind-set precisely to August 20, 2002, the day Cavanagh walked out.

Those who think this way about SBS's calendar of decline might actually be closer to the mark than they imagine. Under the laconic Cavanagh's wary eye SBS managed to achieve two things, simultaneously. It stayed with its up-market traditions, yet managed to increase audience growth, year on year. Briefly, it was

Cavanagh who introduced the network's 9.30pm news, and between 1997 (the year he became head of television) and his departure he'd doubled SBS's news audience. He'd taken the overall reach - that is, those inclined to turn to SBS for at least part of a program - from 5.2million a week to 7.6 million. It was Cavanagh who recognised the potential of South Park and it was he - in the face of some objections - who bought the high-audience English Premier League soccer, since frittered away. He commissioned, among much else, the critically acclaimed *Going Home* and recruited the likes of Jennie Brockie and Jana Wendt. Indeed, it was under Cavanagh that SBS won an outstanding achievement award at Canada's well regarded Banff Television Festival in 2000.

Yet Cavanagh's greatest service to SBS, and to viewers generally, has - for various reasons - remained a secret. This great service was his opposition to a board desire - primarily driven by the chairwoman, Carla Zampatti, and her now deputy, Gerald Stone - to interrupt programs with advertising. Well-placed people say Cavanagh argued firmly against an in-principle board proposal in favour of program interruption. He won a reprieve by suggesting SBS wouldn't want to make such a far-reaching decision without, at least, doing some research to ascertain how its audience might react.

Sources believe an initial Newspan survey suggested 76% of SBS adherents were opposed to in-program commercial breaks. A subsequent report from a qualitative Mackay Research study solidly and unequivocally reinforced Newspan's findings.

Mercifully, Cavanagh won. But winners who are victorious on issues of principle often pay a price. He'd fallen out with a majority of the board. And his relationship with the managing director, Nigel Milan - who'd publicly denied the network was contemplating program interruptions - had diminished. His resignation became all but inevitable.

But it's an ill wind that blows good to nobody. Under Cavanagh, RNZ is doing very well indeed. When was the last time you could, justifiably, write that about SBS?

And again from Errol Simper 16oct03

SBS can also be dumb. Documents which have come the scribe's way indicate the organisation has been indulging itself in a bout of market research and internal soul-searching and the results are littered with dumb suggestions. SBS is, for example, in "danger of being too earnest". There's a need, apparently, for the broadcaster to be "careful about being too cerebral and worthy". Providing "provocative" television appears to be a problem, with some material suggesting "consumers are happy to relax, be entertained or informed, but few turn on to be provoked".

## CAMPAIGN FOR AN INDEPENDENT ABC BOARD!

It really doesn't seem very contentious to propose that transparency and merit should be the basis of appointments to the ABC Board. Indeed the only Australian political party which hasn't already adopted a policy along the lines of Britain's 'Nolan Rules' is the Coalition. And why?

According to Minister for Communications, Helen Coonan, it would just create an extra layer of bureaucracy which wouldn't make much difference anyway.

Friends of the ABC should be campaigning strongly to reverse her attitude, and campaigning as a matter of urgency too. There are currently three positions on the Board which have to be filled on a permanent basis within the next few months. That number in one hit highlights the need to search widely and publicly for people with the interests and qualifications needed to serve on the Board.

Of course there have been friends of the government of the day who've been excellent Board members – but under the present system it's happenstance when that happens. You'd think that the Minister would want Board members to have the confidence of the public. You'd think she'd be pleased to widen the pool from which she makes appointments. And yes, she would still be the one to make the appointments.

But there would be the opportunity for people to put their hat in the ring, and to be recommended by a committee making its selection on the basis of merit, not political affiliation. Wouldn't she consider that the Board would be well served by members who perhaps have direct experience in broadcasting? Financial know-how and community interests are important, and indeed required by the ABC Act, but in the history of the Board those qualifications have been predominant. A wider mix of skills is one outcome which an open appointments system would enable.

Perhaps it would take a while to see any difference – the names and faces of the BBC Board make you wonder what cronyism was like before the appointments system was revised by John Major's government – but Minister Coonan could leave her mark by being innovative, and by putting her undoubted energy into making the innovations work!

Friends, write, write, write! To the Minister, the Prime Minister, your local Member, the press – and bring this important issue to everyone's attention.

Jill Greenwell

Cartoon courtesy Phil Somerville



## WHERE AND WHO TO WRITE TO

For an independent Board  
For an ad-free ABC  
For support for the ABC

Write to the PM, Deputy PM & Leader of the Nationals John Anderson, Minister for Communications Senator Helen Coonan, your local MP and independent MPs.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE CANBERRA ACT 2600  
or email by going to [www.aph.gov.au/](http://www.aph.gov.au/)  
and then to 'WHO'S WHO'

For concern at limitations placed upon ABC staff as outlined on page 1:

Chairman of the Board, Donald McDonald  
Managing Director Russell Balding  
both at ABC GPO BOX 9994 SYDNEY 2001

For complaints, concerns and praise for ABC programming:

Managing Director Russell Balding  
ABC GPO BOX 9994 SYDNEY 2001

Email anyone at the ABC – all addresses are [eg.smith.jane@abc.net.au](mailto:eg.smith.jane@abc.net.au)

On any matter that concerns you, write to your local paper and the national press. Don't know their address? A google search will locate their website and contact details.

Short personal letters - NOT PROFORMA - are the most effective. You could also use the feedback channels on the ABC website.

**THE ABC CAN ONLY BE SAVED BY PUBLIC SUPPORT – that is YOU & ME!**

From The Diary, Media section,  
The Australian, 25nov04:

The axing of GNT by ABC TV director Sandra Levy in the name of 'regionalism' shocked Negus and sparked an extraordinary show of support for the veteran presenter, including a lot of angry calls to Aunty.

One of our favourites was addressed to Levy:

"Your decision to axe George Negus's program is both an extraordinary exercise in bureaucratic conceit as it is rejecting what is widely regarded in our group as both informative and entertaining, in favour of your idea of a self-serving replacement agenda, which decision is sought to be explained through your curious form of doublespeak."

"The ABC must have a death wish. Why take off something off that is working so well?"

"Bloody outrageous to axe this show. Big, big, big mistake."

## ABC reaches digital agreement with Foxtel

Last month, ABC Managing Director Russell Balding announced that the ABC had reached an agreement with Foxtel for ABC television and radio services to be retransmitted on the Foxtel Digital satellite and cable platform from 1 February 2005. As a result, ABC audiences that subscribe to Foxtel Digital will be able to watch the ABC with digital quality pictures and sound on their existing television sets.

Mr Balding also announced the ABC had renewed its agreement with AUSTAR which will now allow AUSTAR to retransmit all the ABC television services across AUSTAR's satellite service to rural and regional Australia and on the cable network in Darwin.

Both agreements will allow retransmission of ABC radio services such as Triple J, ABC Classic FM, Radio National, ABC NewsRadio, dig Internet radio and some metropolitan and regional radio stations. Also under these agreements, the ABC's new television digital channel, ABC 2, will be retransmitted on the Foxtel and AUSTAR platforms.

ABC Media Release 28oct04

### Is this all good news?

Concerns have been expressed about whether Foxtel could influence ABC content, and whether this would be an additional expense for the ABC.

While we have been unable to get a response from the ABC to our questions, it is unlikely that there would be interference from Foxtel or charges for the arrangement. Foxtel cable subscribers on both the new digital and existing analogue cable systems already receive retransmitted ABC television services. This

arrangement is advantageous to both parties.

A greater concern would be if the ABC was locked out from such an arrangement. While at the moment only a minority of people use cable or satellite television, it is likely, if Australia follows overseas trends, that most people will receive television in this way. If the ABC is denied access to the cable platform it may end up confined to a ghetto. It is important therefore that all Australians have easy access to ABC programs. That is why, in the past we have argued for the need to legislate for 'must carry' provisions, that would guarantee the national broadcaster remained accessible.

FABC spokesperson Darce Cassidy:

If Australia goes the way of the US and much of Europe, when cable/satellite delivery systems mature it could be that the majority of television viewers do their TV viewing through Foxtel (or another such company, if there is one). Currently cable/satellite services normally carry all the 'free to air' services as well.

While the news that Foxtel will run all ABC services for now is positive, my understanding of the current arrangement is that at some time in the future Foxtel could lock the ABC out. That is why 'must carry' legislation is vital.

This is in agreement with ABC Managing Director Russell Balding's statement:

'This outcome is of strategic importance to the ABC and is a matter we have been pursuing for some time as we believe that as the national public broadcaster all ABC services should be available on all platforms.'

## ABC TV Scoops Pool

ABC TV programs won a staggering 12 Awards in the television and non-feature categories at the 46th Australian Film Institute Awards.

The mini-series *Marking Time* won a record 7 AFI Awards including the Award for Best Telefeature or Mini-Series, the award for Best Screenplay in Television and Best Direction in Television). *Marking Time* is the very moving story of love between an Iraqi refugee and a young country boy. It was written by John Doyle (aka Roy Slaven), who also wrote another award winning series, *Changi*.

Andrew Denton accepted the Award for Best Light Entertainment Series for *Enough Rope* for the second year running.

The Award for Best Comedy Series went to *Double the Fist* (Megan Harding). *Kath & Kim* won the Award for Outstanding Achievement in Craft in Television. (Kitty Stuckey)

In the non-feature categories the Award for Best Sound in a Non-Feature Film went to *Land of the Morning Star*.

*Inside Australia* won the Award for Best Cinematography in a Non-Feature Film.

## BTN back on our screens

*Behind The News* will return to ABC TV in 2005.

"BTN provided a valuable educational tool for students and we are pleased to be able to bring the program back to the ABC schedule in 2005," said Managing Director Russell Balding.

"A new state of the art website will be launched simultaneously with the television series, designed to be highly interactive through educational activities including quizzes, mailing lists, polls and forums.

"BTN will also be available on the ABC's new digital TV channel when it is launched in March next year and will be available as an additional interactive broadband program on ABC Online."

Media release 12oct04

The Howard Government had no mandate from the Australian people to rewrite the ABC's comprehensive broadcasting Charter, role or functions, journalist and broadcaster Quentin Dempster told the Tasmanian Friends AGM on November 14.

Mr Dempster - author of *Death Struggle - how political and boardroom powerplays are killing the ABC* - told the meeting at Ross, in central Tasmania, that the Liberal Party's 2004 election manifesto committed a re-elected Howard government only to a joint 'review of the adequacy and efficiency of the ABC's use of its funding'.

Mr Dempster said that everyone concerned about the ABC's future survival should note the exact words used in the Liberal Party manifesto: "Any additional resources identified as a result of this review will be available to the ABC to use towards meeting its Charter obligations."

With the government soon to have control of the Senate there was deep concern within the ABC that the government would further marginalise the ABC as part of a major shake-up in cross-media and foreign ownership rules.

"Our fear is that the government will now respond to News Corporation's consistent urgings and reduce the ABC to the weak and sponsor-dependent status of PBS in the United States. I regret to observe that Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer aren't called the media policy 'gatekeepers' in Australia for nothing. They seem to have had a testicular hold on our Prime Ministers from Fraser to Hawke to Keating to Howard. It has resulted in one of the most concentrated print media ownership regimes in the western world. When the battle for the ABC's survival comes after July 2005 everyone concerned about the ABC must remind all members of the government that the Australian people do not want to see the ABC's role further diminished."

Mr Dempster said there were disturbing internal examples

of what public broadcasters called the 'pre-emptive buckle' to intimidating behaviour from executive government.

"I note that some ABC staff are now being asked to declare their party political affiliations on official management forms. I'm recommending that the entire 4200 ABC staff now join and form the Ultimo branch of the Liberal Party. Reductio ad absurdum .. like a Malcolm Turnbull stack. This is a breach of privacy. Let our professional conduct as journalists and program makers be held to account by the agreed editorial policies and internal and external mechanisms.

"I also note that a new draft code of conduct is so broad that it would give unscrupulous managers an easy means of getting rid of people they did not like for entirely spurious or political reasons.

"And I note the managing director's door has been shut to those program makers wanting to debate with him the recent decision to deny archival footage to an accredited documentary maker on the inscrutable basis that it would be used for 'an advocacy or cause'.

"There's another disturbing symptom of the pre-emptive buckle: the National Interest Initiative special funding for regional, business and other content. Although the Board denies it, this is tied money. We should demand that a full audit of NII content be published in the ABC annual report so there is transparency and full substantiation of the Board's claim that this funding mechanism does not represent government hands on the ABC's editorial decision-making. I think tied funding opens a dangerous door to political interference in the ABC.

"Friends, we're facing yet another battle for the ABC's survival as a non-commercial, independent and mainstream public broadcaster. I believe we will soon again have to call on all Australians to help us save the ABC".



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Cartoon thanks to George Aldridge

Good cheer to all at the ABC and all who cherish her!

## BACKGROUND BRIEFING

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