

background briefing

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friends
of the abc

People power

In 1997 the report of the Mansfield Review saved the ABC from more serious depredations beyond the cuts in funding. People power did the trick, with a record number of submissions - almost 11,000, thought to be the largest ever public response - organised by the Friends of the ABC in every state and territory.

In 1976 'Aunty's Nieces and Nephews' in Victoria and Friends of the ABC in the other states (later merged into FABC) sprang from nowhere when the Fraser government announced its plan to dismiss and replace the entire board of Commissioners. Their huge rallies persuaded the Fraser government to drop its proposal.

In 1982, following the Dix review of the ABC, the Friends' campaigned for the rejection of two proposals made by the Commissioners to the Dix committee. The first was to take the orchestras from the control of the ABC. The second was the Commissioners proposal to introduce 'corporate underwriting' - advertising and sponsorship. The government rejected both proposals.

The communications minister said of the second proposal: "It is apparent that many people view the proposal as a direct threat to the ABC's editorial independence and programming integrity." That had certainly been the Friends' argument.

And it is still.

In 2006 we face a similar challenge. The future of the ABC lies with John Howard but it is in our hands too.

If you haven't yet written to the PM about your support for the ABC, for its funding submission and against advertising or sponsorship - **DO IT NOW!**

Kerry Packer, national hero?

The spectacle of the public memorial service for Kerry Packer, paid for from public funds, is an apt metaphor for the making of media policy by the Howard government.

What did Packer do to deserve a taxpayer funded memorial service? Phillip Adams wrote in The Australian magazine 18feb06 that Packer 'never used his great wealth for any great purpose. Australia did a lot for Kerry but he didn't do much for Australia. He made billions out of two government licensed addictions - television and gambling.'

Mr Howard has been consistent for 10 years in devising media policies which favoured the commercial broadcasters *against* the public interest. The stand-out example is the making of digital policy at the dictate of Packer and the other moguls, which has resulted in almost total failure to win over the public to digital. On the other hand, the ABC, eager to take on the challenge of digital, was never given no funding to create new content - money for digital programs was scrounged from other already depleted services.

John Howard famously insisted on Channel 9 as the holder of the election debates, even in the election before he became PM, giving Packer the arrogance to declare that Nine was now the National Broadcaster.

Let us hope that the Packer domination of media policy has died with Kerry.

Cartoon thanks to Bill Leak



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ABC budget hangs in the balance

The ABC's 2006/09 Triennial Funding Submission is currently before the Federal Government. Just what is the ABC seeking? Accounts in the press suggest that the amount is only \$115.2 million over three years (see ** below) but mostly missed this somewhat ambiguous statement in the submission.

"While the ABC has continually demonstrated that it is an efficient broadcaster, costs are growing at a faster rate than increases from the Government's current funding model. In addition to the new policy proposals, the ABC has also sought additional funding to address the cumulative funding gap in relation to the corporation's capital and operational expenditure requirements. I am confident that this issue will be addressed by the Funding Adequacy and Efficiency Review [FAER] commissioned by the Federal Government as part of its 2004 Federal election promises."

In other words, the ABC trusts that the FAER will confirm there is a gap between what it currently receives and what it actually needs to run its current services, and will recommend additional funding to fill that gap. It also trusts that the government will heed its own review and accept its recommendations.

'TRUST' is the key word here. Can they -and we - trust the government to be reasonable and fair? It emerged in February's Senate Estimates that this review is not the one which the ABC asked for before the 2004 election. The ABC sought a review of the adequacy of its funding, not a cost-cutting exercise in the guise of an 'efficiency review'.

** The injection of the additional \$115.2million over three years would be used in three key sectors:

- * to boost the radio and online coverage of local events in outer metropolitan and regional areas, where audiences are currently under-served, the ABC proposes additional Radio Online producers in 36 locations across Australia. (\$4.5m pa) [If this is obtained it will be the first instance of money being granted for provision of online services.]
- * to promote the take-up of digital television by Australian consumers the ABC proposes a major boost to digital content production for the ABC2 digital television channel and the development of interactive television enhancements. (\$13.9m pa)
- * to increase the Australian content on ABC Television, the ABC proposes a production fund fully committed to producing Australian drama, documentaries, children's and family drama and arts programs through the independent television production sector. (\$20m pa)

The submission also seeks confirmation of existing targeted, short-term funding: that is, \$9.9m over 3 years for Radio Australia, and incorporation of the National Interest Initiative funding - \$54.4m over three years - into the ABC's base funding.

The Australian Screen Directors Association believes the ABC would need to double the money in its funding submission if it were to increase drama to a level near that of the commercial broadcasters.

"We can no longer allow our national broadcaster to be marginalised. The industry's concern is that with the lack of Australian drama the ABC itself is at risk."
The Australian 9feb06

Managing Director Russell Balding said this submission has been made at a time when the rate of change in Australia's media landscape continues to escalate, making it vital for the ABC to stay at the forefront of these changes. "For the past 74 years the ABC has delivered the most comprehensive and far reaching media service to all Australians. This submission to the Government is aimed at re-affirming that role for the future," Mr Balding said.

Mr Balding will have left the ABC when we learn whether he has been successful or not in the May federal budget.

Loss of Balding at this time a blow to the ABC

It's difficult to derive too much joy from Balding's departure. He's a calm man who was in the right place at just the right time in that the corporation he came to inherit was in considerable turmoil after the unfortunate efforts of his predecessor, Jonathan Shier.

Balding brought maturity, sanity, credibility and competence to his office. Yes, he was an accountant who lacked journalistic background, but you can't have everything. Unlike some of his predecessors he was more interested in managing the organisation than in pirouetting around, making hyperbolic, self-important declamations. However you'd describe Russell Stephen Balding, it'd hardly be as a strutting, self-aggrandising, would-be celebrity. Those who've doubted his worth might care to ask themselves why the tough, ruthlessly pragmatic Max Moore-Wilton chose to recruit him as the Sydney Airport Corporation's chief executive.

Others may ask why Balding would want to work at Sydney Airport which, by wide consensus, is a ghastly place. Cross your fingers and fervently hope he can improve it. He'd earn the sincere, heartfelt gratitude of millions of travellers.

Erroll Simper
The Australian 2feb06

DO YOU THINK BALDING'S
TAKEDOFF WILL CLEAR HOWARD
TO LAND ON THE ABC?



Cartoon thanks to Lindsay

New life or a lingering decline for the ABC

The next few months are as crucial a time as any for the ABC since the feral tyranny of Jonathan Shier.

The budget allocation is crucial to the fortunes and future of the ABC. It will determine the direction of the ABC: forward to an empowered future for public broadcasting or irrevocably backwards to niche broadcasting possibly compromised by some form of non-government financing.

This couldn't be at a worse time for the broadcaster, which will have lost its well-respected managing director Russell Balding only shortly before the term of the chairman of the board, Donald McDonald, is due to expire.

Government holds all the cards

Balding's departure is imminent and chairman Donald McDonald's term expires in July. Howard must surely be tempted to hand-pick a new chairman who he thinks may be willing and able to give dear old Aunty a good shake-up, and to ensure that his appointment is in turn able to choose a like-minded managing director.

The ABC has been a burr under Howard's saddle for the past decade, as it was for the Keating government before that, and Hawke before that. It goes with the territory: the public broadcaster's role is to deliver news and probing analysis free of any government intervention or control.

Governments always feel aggrieved that they cop the closest analysis. They complain that Oppositions get away with porkies and are given a free rein to criticise, but that is the nature of news: those in a position of influence and power will always attract more scrutiny than those who are powerless to deliver anything but words.

Howard has had the ABC in his sights since he came to power in 1996. The Prime Minister appointed a close personal friend, the opera administrator McDonald, in the hope he would steer the ABC away from the biases the Government saw in its news coverage and attack the culture of elitism that it feels pervades the corridors.

In turn, McDonald led a board that appointed Jonathan Shier to the managing director's job. Shier initiated a flurry of controversial reforms and restructures largely aimed at crushing the Left-leaning cultures within the corporation.

But Shier became so wildly unpopular and erratic that McDonald was moved to lead the forces orchestrating his dismissal. In the process McDonald became a fierce protector of the ABC and its independence.

Balding was promoted from his position as chief financial officer, and brought a period of calm. He was the epitome of a manager rather than a reformer. At that point the score was Howard 0, ABC 1.

It is unlikely McDonald will be offered a third term. Ten years at the helm of the nation's top public broadcaster is a fair stint, and there is a view held by all sides that it's time to re-energise Aunty with some creative flair. Howard could announce a new chairman before McDonald departs and allow his nominee to either delay, or participate in, the selection of a new managing director.

Mark Day *The Australian* 02feb06

IT IS DISTURBING TO THINK OF THE LOSS of experience and corporate memory that the departures of Russell Balding and Donald McDonald will mean. And it is even more disturbing to anticipate the way the Howard government might use their power to appoint their replacements to 'engineer culture change'.

The pathway to this end is being smoothed by the rants of the loyal backers of Mr Howard in the press, most whom have regular gigs on the ABC - on the Insiders, RN's Breakfast and even one with his own program on RN.

Friends of the Howard Government (FHG) like Gerard Henderson, Michael Duffy and editors of *The Australian* declare that extra funding will depend on the ABC appeasing the government.

Yet the soon-to-resign Balding expects that his advisers and maybe his replacement will roll up in Canberra and receive a large load of extra money. Well, it might work. But it hasn't in the past. The ABC is most likely to receive the funding it needs after, and if, it reforms itself.

Gerard Henderson SMH 7feb06

It's curious the Howard Government has had so little success in fixing the ABC's left-wing bias after 10 years of board-stacking.

Michael Duffy SMH 11feb06

For years these comments have been made by FHGs. They have received very little support from the public but plenty from Liberal politicians.

Yet the ABC is *supposed* to be independent; the government is *supposed* not to interfere in the running of the public broadcasters. Note that the ABC is *responsible to the Parliament not to the government*, though this is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance.

For the greater part of the last 10 years the ABC has been pushed into a position where it has had to defend itself interminably and correct statements made by ministers, politicians and FHGs.

At the same time the government has escaped criticism for its handling of the ABC - except in a few instances by a few honourable critics - despite the fact that it has failed the country through its punitive treatment of the public broadcaster and brought it to the point of decay.

It has never fully restored ABC funding, despite its 1996 pre-election commitment and its huge budget surpluses. It has interfered in its affairs, it attempted to direct its management and programming under Alston, and, through a board 100% biased in its favour, it inflicted upon it the horrors of the Shier regime. It has continually intimidated its news and current affairs department, and induced a measure of self-censorship and fear in its management.

Yet throughout the 10 year period of the Howard government the ABC has never lost the confidence, respect - and yes, love - of the Australian people. It has performed miracles of efficiency, leading the way in new technology and introducing new services without any government contribution. It has even achieved its highest audiences in this period against all the odds.

JL

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We're talking about the ABC here. Suggestions that the ABC should take advertising are coming hard and fast in the print media and from Coalition politicians. It is said that a little 'tasteful' advertising won't affect the programs. Don't you believe it. See what happened to the SBS.

The impact of advertising on the SBS

There have been major changes to the SBS since the introduction of advertising, but they have not happened overnight. We can chart developments at the SBS since strictly limited advertising was introduced in 1992-3.

1992 SBS Managing Director Brian Johns moves programs in languages other than English (LOTE) out of prime time as advertising is about to start. [i] Subsequent chief executives maintain the practice of English language domination of prime time, with LOTE programs broadcast either in the mornings, afternoons, or late at night, when many people would be at work, asleep, or otherwise occupied.

March 2003 SBS management is involved in a dispute with its own journalists over the introduction of advertising into news programs, which had previously been exempt. MEAA NSW secretary says 40 journalists had written to management claiming that sponsorship of news and current affairs programs compromised editorial integrity and could result in reporters being disciplined or fired for airing unfavourable stories about advertisers. [ii]

November 2003 More key staff to leave. "Since the arrival in January of former Television New Zealand (TVNZ) executive Shaun Brown as the head of television, there has been a succession of changes on and off screen at the Special Broadcasting Service. Over the past few months, long-established people and programs have been removed or relocated, new line-ups have been launched and pivotal programs reshaped. Since August 2002, the head of television has left, the chief programmer has resigned and the head of internal production has been told his job no longer exists." [iii]

December 2003 The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council says that SBS has lost its way. FECCA Chairman Abd Malak said that his organisation was "very close to giving up on SBS TV.....In the last three or four years they have separated themselves from ethnic communities. They don't come to our functions or religious festivals." The dismissive, not to say insulting, response from SBS Managing Director Nigel Milan was: "We're not going to cover the clog dancing from Brisbane Town Hall." [iv]

January 2004 The Age's media writer Ross Warneke comments on the banishment of non-English programs from prime time. "The bulk of its 'ethnic content' these

days is its morning news marathon, with hour after hour of foreign language news services relayed from everywhere from Manila to Madrid". [v]

May 2004 Staff become disenchanted. The Age's Debi Enker writes that SBS staff fear "that the search for a broader audience is leading to the acquisition and commissioning of programs that are 'safer and blander', that SBS will become 'a poor man's version of a commercial network rather than providing a challenging alternative'. The harshest critics fear SBS will end up looking like a second-rate cable-TV station, running reality TV shows and English-language drama series that the free-to-air channels have rejected as either being too limited in their appeal or too provocative." [vi]

June 2004 SBS joins with commercial broadcasters to oppose the tightening of restrictions on tobacco advertising through the insidious practice of product placement. [vii]

October 2004 SBS joins with the existing commercial stations to restrict competition and to argue against the granting of an additional free to air TV licence. The reason: more competition would impact on their advertising income. [viii]

November 2004 Veteran SBS film critic Margaret Pomeranz, who together with co-host David Stratton deserted SBS for the ABC comments:

"I think that the current management has a much more commercial bent than any previous management. They seem to be after the young female demographic, and I worry about this, because this is a demographic already catered to in excess on the commercial television stations." [ix]

June 2005 George Zangalis, President of the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council, and a former member of the SBS board, issues a media release criticizing the direction of SBS TV. He says, "The SBS was established as a multicultural broadcaster, but has been moving away from its original charter. Programming in community languages has shrunk, while English programming has grown. Advertising has increased and become increasingly strident. Rather than focusing on different cultures, the SBS seems to be moving towards mainstream sports like cricket and now AFL. There is plenty of this type of programming on the ABC and the three commercial channels." [x]

August 2005 When first introduced, advertising on SBS is limited to five minutes per hour, and is not permitted to interrupt programs. It can only be used to top and tail programs. There are media reports that the SBS Board wants these restrictions lifted, and Managing Director Nigel Milan commissions a confidential survey on possible audience reactions to program interruptions. [xi] However the government does not remove the ban on advertisements interrupting programs. >>

February 2006 The SBS confirms the complaint made by George Zangalis, President of the Ethnic Broadcasters Council, in June 2005, that SBS advertising has increased and become increasingly strident. SBS's director of commercial affairs, Richard Finlayson says that the broadcaster has reviewed "the type of ads it will and will not accept. In the past SBS has been reluctant to carry some ads, such as hard-hitting, in-your-face retails ads. That's changing." [xii]

Darce Cassidy February 2006

IT IS BY NO MEANS CERTAIN that advertising would benefit the ABC financially. The government might well decide to reduce funding to the ABC in line with advertising income, leaving the ABC with the same budget problems. TVNZ ended up subsidising the government and in the process abandoned its public service charter.ⁱ

Perhaps the strongest argument against running advertisements on the ABC is the need to ensure media diversity. Media ownership is becoming increasingly concentrated in Australia. While the commercial mass media are controlled by a handful of companies, a degree of diversity is guaranteed by the fact that Australia has three distinct broadcasting sectors, each with its own special characteristics, and its own funding model.

The commercial sector exists by creating audiences, which it then sells to advertisers. All other things being equal, larger audiences can be sold for more money than smaller audiences.

Where there are a limited number of channels this can bring into play the Principle of Minimum Differentiation. Professor Glenn Withers explains:

The reason for this is that stations based on advertising revenue will seek to maximize their audience (and thereby their revenue). Stations will therefore duplicate program types as long as the audience share obtained is greater than that from other programs. Hence a number of stations may compete by sharing a market for one type of program (such as crime dramas) and still do better in audience numbers than by providing programs of other types (such as arts and culture). In economics this point is an application of the Principle of Minimum Differentiation, a principle also capable of explaining such associated phenomenon as why bank branches may cluster together, why airline schedules may be parallel, and why political parties may have convergent policy platforms.ⁱⁱ

A study carried out by McKinsey and Company in 1999 concluded that those public service broadcasters which relied on advertising for a significant part of their funding have little to differentiate them from commercial channels, and offer little effective competition.

Our survey shows clearly the potential dangers of this approach. We have found evidence that the higher the advertising figure is as a proportion of total revenues, the less distinctive a public broadcaster is likely to be. iii

i [www.friendsoftheabc.org/Public Broadcasting in NZ](http://www.friendsoftheabc.org/Public_Broadcasting_in_NZ)

ii Glenn Withers, *Economics & Regulation of Broadcasting* April 2002

iii McKinsey & Co. *Public Service Broadcasters around the World* 1999

[i] Brian Johns, 'SBS: Coping with a Strange Idea', in *Multicultural Australia: The Challenges of Change*, D. Goodman et al. Carlton, Scribe, 1991 [ii] Kylie Walker, *SBS clashes with journalists over ads*, *The Age*, 9mar03 [iii] SMH, 11nov03 [iv] Christopher Kremmer, *Ethnic groups find SBS sex and soccer a turn off*, SMH 20dec03 [v] Ross Warneke, *Public broadcasters face big year*, *The Age*, 8jan04 [vi] Debi Enker, *Where to now, SBS?*, *The Age*, 27may04 [vii] Letter from Julie Eisenberg, SBS Head of Policy, to Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, 17jun04 [viii] *Provision of Commercial Television Broadcasting Services after 31 December 2006*, SBS Submission to the Department of Information Technology, Communications and the Arts, October 2004 [ix] Radio National Media Report 4nov04 [x] NEMBC Media Release, 8jun05 [xi] Errol Simper, *Borrowed time up for Milan*, *The Australian*, 11aug05 [xii] Neil Shoebridge, *FIFA world cup kicks off SBS ad sales*, *Australian Financial Review*, 27feb06

THE STUDY OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS Around the World by McKinsey and Company mounts a strong case against advertising on public service broadcasters.

This review of 20 broadcasting markets on four continents focused on the issue of competition in those markets. It states: 'Our analysis shows clearly that an increased dependence on advertising has led inexorably to a more populist and less distinctive schedule.' It goes on to argue that the less distinctive a public broadcaster is the less impact it makes on the overall market, and the less competitive it is. It found that competition in broadcasting markets was strongest when the public service broadcaster took no advertising, and weakest when the public service broadcaster received a substantial income from advertising.

McKinsey argued against greater regulation of the media, but in favour of supporting advertising-free public broadcasters, which would 'combine creative and market pressures on [other] broadcasters to achieve a society's aims for its broadcasting market'.

On the other hand, McKinsey argues that distinctiveness alone is not enough. The public service broadcaster must be large enough, well funded enough, and mainstream enough to have a significant market share. Without that, it has no real market power, and therefore no real competitive impact.

NEITHER THE GOVERNMENT NOR THE OPPOSITION have much time for the ABC. Yet most Australians do, and they are prepared to pay more for it. The National Social Science Survey, carried out in 1999 and made available to Professor Glenn Withers of the ANU in March 2000, found that "the average willingness to pay for the ABC was 30 per cent higher than the 1999 actual mean outlay: in other words, people were prepared to pay \$48 per head rather than the then current \$37 per head." The survey found that while taxpayers wanted to pay less for social security, defence, industry assistance and a range of other government services, they were willing to pay more for the ABC.

Darce Cassidy

Myth makers, culture busters and public opinion

The managing director of the ABC has resigned and, as the Government mulls over the ABC submission for its next triennial budget, those with vested interests in the downsizing of the ABC are sharpening their knives. Do they reflect public opinion, as they claim? Or are they aiming for a right-wing takeover of the broadcaster like that attempted in the Shier era?

DAVID MARR has the answers, writing in the SMH 27jan06:

SOMEWHERE high above Ultimo, the little board of the ABC is already engaged in the task of finding a new managing director. They're an eclectic bunch - a banker, an anthropologist, a newspaper columnist, a barrister with a special expertise in liquor laws plus a staff journalist, all chaired by a former arts administrator, Donald McDonald.

With money so tight at the ABC, it's fortunate these men and women have been offered so much free advice to guide them since Russell Balding made the dazzling announcement a week ago that he was off to run Sydney Airport.

The Queensland Liberal senator Santo Santoro sent word that this was finally an opportunity to break the "entrenched, culture of left-leaning bias" at the national broadcaster. He told Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*: "Now is the time to appoint a managing director who will not be afraid to enforce those rules and restore respect for the balance and quality of the ABC news coverage."

It's the dream that never dies. Santoro's message chimes perfectly with the mood of a board once again talking culture-busting - this time not just to the editorial stance of the ABC but to its history of offering journalists and producers the security of long-term employment. The key words are balance and flexibility. And despite the ABC's own research, the culture-busters claim urgent public clamour for these changes.

They have been disappointed so often before. Jonathan Shier was given the gig all those years ago because he was thought to have the courage, the flair, the insight etc to break the old culture of the ABC. Alas for his backers in the Victorian Liberal Party, those hopes went up in smoke. He wasn't up to the job of running - let alone transforming - the place.

Shier's backers next picked Trevor Kennedy. When he didn't make the shortlist, the Treasurer, Peter Costello, put public pressure on the board. In May 2002, he told Melbourne radio 3AW that the ABC was dithering over the appointment - and had an entrenched left-wing culture that was "even left of the Labor Party".

McDonald rebuked him fiercely. "Let me make one thing very clear: it is the sole responsibility of the board of the ABC to select the managing director. The board will continue to defend the ABC's independence, where its strength and relevance lies. To do otherwise would be an abrogation of its legislated duty to the public of Australia."

The culture-busters - on and off the ABC board - are not deterred by their track record for picking duds to do their work. Nor does public indifference to their great quarrel with the ABC put them off. Culture-busting voices such as *The Australian* simply insist there is mass support.

"The ABC is run by some staff - for themselves and their mates," wrote the national broadsheet the other day. "This is a

very small group and they are utterly unconnected to the vast mass of Australians, especially members of the traditional ABC audience who look to the broadcaster for high-quality local and imported entertainment and unbiased analysis."

But despite *The Bill* twice a week and all those other British fillers, the appalling lack of new drama, too much cooking, the budget-forced summer suspension of nearly every show worth watching on television, dud arts coverage year-round and the creeping political caution of programming, the public still love the ABC.

The figures aren't secret. Every year the ABC posts on its website a Newspoll survey of community attitudes. The results are there for everyone to read. The May 2005 survey commissioned by the ABC found "nine in 10 Australians continue to believe the ABC provides a valuable service to the community, and half believe it provides a very valuable service".

Westpac would kill for figures like that. The detail is fascinating. It's not all pluses for the ABC, but it's impossible to read the figures as evidence of community outrage. Viewers and listeners want more of this, less of that, but there is no support in those 50 pages of graphs and bar charts for the argument that Australians are crying out for root-and-branch change at the ABC.

It seems bias at the ABC is so insidious that the public don't even notice it.

A couple of years ago, *Readers Digest* asked its Australian subscribers to name the brands and institutions they most trusted. The responses were weighted by age, gender etc to translate them into a true community verdict. The ABC came in as the sixth most trusted government service, between public schools and public hospitals. It beat universities, the CSIRO, the weather bureau, the governor-general and - in 23rd place - Federal Parliament. Among trusted brands, ABC News beat all the other television news services.

So how can the culture-busters claim to be speaking for the people in the face of community verdicts like that? They can't - but among themselves they say it's proof of just how insidious bias is at the ABC, that it goes largely undetected: the public are hoodwinked. Given the chance, they would demand root-and-branch change. So the argument rolls on.

"The real culture that needs to be busted at the ABC is the culture of poverty."

In the next few days, accountants KPMG will be presenting to the Howard Government the results of a huge investigation into the funding and the efficiency of the ABC. The Government itself set the terms. Few doubt KPMG will find the ABC - its government support reduced by more than a quarter over the past 20 years - is indeed underfunded. And it's a good bet that KPMG will find that after four years under Balding, the ABC is also efficiently run.

But will that report ever see the light of day? Right now the Government has the best chance in a long time to muzzle the broadcaster. It's not going to welcome a fat, dry report from the big end of town saying that the real culture that needs to be busted at the ABC is the culture of poverty.

Accolades for Our ABC

FROM THE RANTS of the sour anti-ABC critics you could imagine that the ABC was failing dismally. Elsewhere we comment on the public support for the ABC in general and on this page we have evidence of the excellence of the ABC from the experts.

BUT FIRST a rare example of censure of the commercial media and a reminder of what they get away with.

Media must avoid fanning flames

SOME radio practitioners are fond of calling talkback shows 'dial-in democracy' - as if the ability of people to go live to air to have their say, no matter how wrong in fact, misguided in intent or inflammatory in effect, somehow brings a benefit to society.

Talkback radio can inform and entertain. But it is also the haunt of a core of uneducated, bigoted, aged insomniacs carefully orchestrated by clever and manipulative hosts, universally right-wing, who know exactly which button to push to yield extreme reactions - all in the name of 'good radio'.

And they call it the "voice of the people". It's not. It's the voice of a very small number of blinkered fools who make enough noise to drown out the commonsense majority. In the wake of the Cronulla riots, the old cry has gone up: it's the fault of the media - and fingers have pointed at talkback radio and some of its more visible hosts, such as Sydney market leader Alan Jones on 2GB.

In my view, if the question is "did the media cause the Cronulla disgrace?", the answer is no. But to the question "did the media help simmering tensions to ignite, and did the media fan the flames?", the answer is yes.

Mark Day *The Australian* 14dec05

In recent issues we have featured the racist broadcasts of Bob Francis, who was also censured for abusing a judge. And who can forget some years ago the cash-for-comment scandal involving John Laws. The penalties are derisory and nothing much changes.

Another point to make is the nexus between talkback and the politicians, notably the Prime Minister. How much of his success is due to his making talkback radio a virtual arm of government?

And now for something completely different.

The ABC dominates the Walkley Awards for excellence in journalism

The Walkley Awards are made each year by the Walkley Foundation whose aims are to "organise, administer and promote the Walkley Awards as well as continuing to advance the interests of professional and ethical journalism in Australia."

The judges are all people with a background in journalism. Judging is a two tier process. Special judging panels in each category select three finalists from that category. A panel comprised of members of the Walkley Advisory Board then selects the winner of each category from among the finalists. The prestigious Gold Walkley, and the award for journalistic leadership are selected by the Board.

The Walkley Awards are similar to the Academy Awards and the Pulitzer Prize in that the judges are drawn primarily from the relevant profession. ABC staff are represented on

both the Advisory Board and the various judging panels, but they are heavily outnumbered by journalists from the commercial media. In 2005, of the 73 judging panel members only six worked for the ABC. Another two were retired ABC journalists. Of the eleven Advisory Board members, who make the final decisions, only one is from the ABC. The Board is chaired by Malcolm Farr of the Daily Telegraph.

In testing allegations of ABC bias it is relevant to ask what the Walkley Foundation, which tends to reflect the views of the industry as a whole, thinks of the standard of journalism in the ABC.

In 2005 ABC Television won seven Walkley Awards, ABC Radio won five awards, while the ABC won the Gold Walkley for both TV and radio work, and the book award, a total of fourteen Walkleys.

By comparison:

- * The Nine Network won no awards.
- * The Seven Network won no awards.
- * The Ten Network won no awards.
- * SBS TV won one award.
- * No commercial radio stations won awards.

Darce Cassidy

ABC New Media & Digital Services wins 6 AIMIA Awards including Best of the Best

ABC New Media & Digital Services, together with various co-production partners, has won six awards at the prestigious Australian Interactive Multimedia Industry Association (AIMIA) Awards, at a ceremony held in Adelaide on Friday 3 March.

The AIMIA Awards are the peak Australian multimedia industry awards, acknowledging excellence in new media content production. ABC New Media & Digital Services had 10 projects as finalists in this year's awards, and won 6 of the possible 19 categories.

Lynley Marshall, Director of ABC New Media and Digital Services, said the Awards were a great acknowledgement of the quality of <http://abc.net.au> content and the collaborative success of ABC staff and external partners.

"The success of so many of our sites is recognition of the innovation, talent and hard work of everyone involved in bringing the content from development to download," she said. "We share these Awards with the external artists, developers and producers, together with the organisations that provided funding support and expertise."

ABC is top media brand

The ABC is our top media brand, with 52% of Australians recognising it as 'their ABC', followed by the Nine Network, on 50%.

The ABC is equal third (with Woolworths) in a list of 'most trusted brands', with Cadbury, and Bunnings coming first and second. Nine Network comes in at number seven.

Fast food, alcohol and gambling advertising, worth millions of dollars to media companies annually, is opposed by most Australians, according to new research tracking social change in Australia during the past decade.

More than half (51%) think fast food advertising is unacceptable, compared with just 18% who support it, the latest Australia Scan data shows. Even more oppose alcohol advertising (53%) and gambling campaigns (79%).

Lara Sinclair *The Australian* 02mar06

Argonauts, prepare to mutiny! The strength of Friends of the ABC

Ken Inglis

'For more than a quarter of a century now your organisation has been arousing and channelling public concern about the ABC, and its commitment to doing that remains as indispensable now as it was in the beginning.'

This is Ken Inglis, historian of the ABC, speaking at the national conference of the FABC in 2002. Below are excerpts from that talk. Editorial comments and links are inside [these brackets].

The Friends came into being [when Malcolm Fraser had control of both houses of parliament] as a response to cuts imposed on the national broadcaster in 1976. I quote from my book ['This is the ABC']:

'When ABC people met at gatherings of their unions, there was plenty of applause for speakers who said that the new government was deliberately weakening the national system in order to mute its independent voice and to make it compete less vigorously with private enterprise.'

'Outside the ABC, cells of troubled listeners and viewers began to form ... first in Melbourne, where they took the name "Aunty's Nieces and Nephews", then in other cities where they were "Friends of the ABC", to deplore the cuts and generally speak out. The Melbourne body described itself as "an association of citizens committed to the preservation of an independent ABC." Friends of the ABC in Sydney ... expressed the Argonautical concern of people who had cherished the ABC all their lives and sensed that it was in peril.'

[Professor Inglis wondered if the Friends was/were unique in the world. He asked this of a friend who worked for the ABC for many years before going to the BBC, Anthony Rendell, who wrote:]

"We don't have anything as effective as Friends appears to be on behalf of the ABC. ... I can't imagine a crowd being summoned [in the London] as in Canberra just to demonstrate on behalf of the ABC." [This is a reference to the huge demonstrations held in capital cities leading to the dumping of Jonathon Shier.]

"The BBC approach traditionally," [continued Rendell] "was to head straight for Whitehall and Westminster, and influence the people there, not going out to woo the public. And very effectively in many ways over a long period. {BBC} World Service was doing it well in my time. When budget cuts were threatened, we had a man who simply rang the House of Lords number a few times, and a few days later there would be a Lords debate, with a big majority voting 'hands off World Service'. This infuriated the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who after all gave us the money, but they recognised power when they saw it of course.

"There is a re redoubtable organization here, *The Voice of the Listener and Viewer*, very much the creation of a tough lady, Jocelyn Hay, and it does its best, but is not such a publicly known body [as the Friends of the ABC]."

Contrast those phone calls from Broadcasting House to Westminster with what happened in Australia late in 1976. I quote again from 'This is the ABC'.

'No government had ever behaved so radically towards the ABC as Fraser's now did when it set about re-writing the law to make a clean sweep of the Commissioners appointed by its predecessor. "Argonauts, prepare to mutiny!" called Phillip Adams. He and Gough Whitlam and others were addressing a packed Melbourne Town Hall on 23 November at a meeting convened by Aunty's Nieces and Nephews to protest about the government's policy towards the ABC and especially to demand that the Bill amending the Broadcasting and Television Act be not passed in the present session. The resolutions were sent to all members of the federal parliament, and the Nieces and Nephews lobbied against the clause removing the Commissioners.

'On 30 November in Canberra about a thousand people attended a lunch-time rally of protest. After Nieces and Nephews up from Melbourne had done a round of government back-benches they reckoned that they had nine votes against the Bill. Delegates from the rally were received by Fraser and Robinson (the Minister for Telecommunications).'

The Minister told them ... that there was almost no hope that the government would defer the legislation. 'But then, on 3 December, the back-benchers lobbied by Aunty's Nieces and Nephews induced cabinet to drop from the Bill the clause removing the Commissioners.'

From these ad hoc beginnings arose the continuing national organization, everywhere known as the Friends of the ABC, with some regrets in Melbourne that they were no longer Aunty's Nieces and Nephews. The Friends lobbied the Fraser government in 1982 to reject two recommendations of the Dix committee which had just reviewed the ABC. The first was to remove the orchestras from the custody of the ABC, and on that issue the Friends were shoulder to shoulder with the ABC's Commissioners. The second was the introduction of advertising or sponsorship or, in the new lingo of managerialism, 'corporate underwriting'. On that momentous issue the Friends were against the Commissioners, who had actually proposed corporate underwriting in its submission to the Dix committee.

The minister's explanation of why his government was rejecting that recommendation was itself a tribute to the Friends. "It is apparent", he said, "that many people view the proposal as a direct threat to the ABC's editorial independence and programming integrity." That had certainly been the burden of the Friends' public statements and lobbying.'

[Here's an example of the effects of public concern on the ABC from the Canberra rally in Feb 2001.]

When John Highfield spoke, he quoted from an article by Anthony Rendell about the effects of the new managerialism on the BBC under John Birt, appointed director-general in 1992. We sat and stood riveted by the shock of recognition as John Highfield read these words of Anthony Rendell: 'The typical new CEO has not worked in public broadcasting before, is combative and intolerant of dissent, and appears driven to measure his success by the degree to which he exerts dominance over people and organizations.'

>>>

Rendell's commentary, said John Highfield, was a signal warning about our ABC.

The Friends had given Highfield a platform he could not otherwise have had for making public his own and his colleagues' concern about the condition of the ABC [under Shier]. That was true also of Quentin Dempster and other ABC speakers at the rally. If we are counting up the Friends' achievements, this is not the least: to give broadcasters a public platform. They can't air the problems of the ABC when they're on the job. They don't see the audiences

they're addressing. Getting out and talking to the Friends, one senior person in Radio National told me this week, is a heartening experience.

[Finally Ken Inglis turned] to Errol Simper for two judgements: that the Friends 'in some way and to some extent or another, represents community values and expectation'; and that 'If the government or ABC administration of the day appears intent on certain actions with which you don't agree, then – to stay true to the public broadcasting ideal – you must oppose.'

Lobbying in Canberra – supporting the ABC since 1976

As part of our campaign in support of the ABC's triennial funding submission, Friends of the ABC lobbied the Coalition Backbench Committee on Communications Policy in Canberra on 13 February.

Our representatives were Glenys Stradijot from Victoria, Darce Cassidy from South Australia and Jill Greenwell from the ACT. (Gary Cook from NSW was involved in our preparation but was unable to get to Canberra on the day.)

As it happens there were only two members of the committee present – the Chair, Queensland National Party MP, Paul Neville (whose interview on *The Media Report* on 27 Oct 05 was reported in the last edition of *Background Briefing*) and the Secretary, ACT Senator Gary Humphries.

The focus of our approach was the ABC's triennial budget, and we were asking the committee members to lend their support to an adequately funded ABC.

We wanted to stress:

that any measure of 'adequacy' should include the value placed upon the ABC by its viewers, listeners, etc., of whom there are far more than the FABC membership we were representing;

that external benchmarks – comparisons with public broadcasters overseas, commercial broadcasters, and the public's willingness to pay – demonstrate the inadequacy of the ABC's funding;

that the manner of funding – triennial, not targeted, with no content quotas – should not compromise the ABC's independence.

The committee members questioned the claim of inadequate funding. They referred to the 'high quality' of ABC programming – so where was the inadequate funding? There was a lot of discussion about the huge cut in Australian drama, and we gave other examples – for example, less political satire; more 'buy-ins' on *4 Corners*; a fall in Radio Australia audiences (for example, only 7 million in Indonesia today down from a high of \$20 million plus before the major cuts.

It was clear that these two committee members were sympathetic to the ABC, but that to be persuaded of the ABC's underfunding they needed identifiable and

measurable areas where the ABC has made cuts. We did explain that this isn't easy because the ABC 'economised' – less time for research, avoidance of certain labour-intensive topics, fewer satellite crosses, etc – and managed to maintain quality only at huge, hidden cost. The ABC doesn't usually publicise what it *doesn't* do, but concentrates on what it *does* do.

In that context, the external benchmarks become very important as a source of persuasion.

It was only near the end, in discussion about the manner of funding, that the question of advertising cropped up. Gary Humphries we know has suggested 'carefully controlled', 'limited' advertising. Paul Neville suggested to us that it could be said there's not a lot of difference between the ABC's promotion of its own products and, for example, a 'Macquarie Bank's Australian Story' or some such sponsorship.

It worried us that they were considering advertising as a solution to inadequate funding. We said that advertising was insidious, and what starts off low profile too easily becomes manipulative. We made it very clear that the Friends of the ABC were resolutely opposed to advertising on the ABC, and undertook to write to them with further information.

We thought the meeting was useful, and it added weight to our presentation that there were three state branches represented.

However, the follow up is in the hands of all our members. (You could copy pages from this issue – eg pages 5 & 6 and send them to your federal MP with a covering letter.)

The more that we all inform our federal politicians about what we value and what we know we've lost in the ABC, the better supported will be those Coalition MPs who do know the worth of the ABC. It could also be very effective if individual Friends approach or write to our local Members expressing our concerns about advertising, especially if we can give them examples that illustrate the impossibility of controlling advertising without ultimately eroding editorial and programming independence.

Jill Greenwell, President FABC ACT & Region

Flaws in the system

Flaws in the system of choosing directors for the Reserve Bank were brought to light at Senate Estimate hearings in February. The Governor of the Reserve Bank, Ian Macfarlane, was answering questions on the controversy surrounding Robert Gerard who was found to have been in conflict with the tax office when appointed a director of the ARB. Mr Macfarlane said there were concerns about the way directors were appointed.

"Someone was appointed who had engaged in some behaviour such that, had it been known, they would not have been appointed. So I think that that does show up a flaw," Mr Macfarlane said. Most importantly he said he would welcome a system like that in Britain.

The failure of current practice, which includes the way appointments are made to the board of the ABC, was described by Nicholas Gruen writing in the Courier-Mail:

CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY ONLY THRIVE IN WELL FUNCTIONING INSTITUTIONS.

The government's continuing defence of Robert Gerard's indefensible position on the Reserve Bank board exemplifies the current malaise. One by one, independent institutions feel the pull of an Orwellian vortex of executive party political power and spin.

Thus governments coast-to-coast, of both political persuasions, fund political advertising that's ever more thinly disguised as public information. Officials holding high office are appointed and dismissed at whim. After some unguarded concession of the obvious, they issue 'clarifications' to protect their jobs and their political masters. Upper houses cease reviewing the governments who now control them. And so it goes. If we want to protect our institutions, and so secure our democracy against cronyism, we could start with the Reserve Bank board.

By contrast, Britain's quieter approach has lifted expectations of public appointments far higher than ours.

Prime Minister John Major established the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1994 after a scandal in which Conservative MPs asked questions on notice, for £2,000 a pop from Harrods' owner and once aspiring father-in-law of Princess Di, Mohamed Al-Fayed.

According to the resulting 'Nolan Rules', appointments to public boards are still made by ministers, but only after positions have been advertised and a merit-based shortlist is compiled by a panel that must include an independent assessor. Ministers can depart from the procedure - including by appointing someone not on the shortlist - but this must be reported to the Commissioner for Public Appointments who may comment publicly.

Of course these mechanisms don't guarantee integrity in government ... but they sure help. Their very existence sets expectations which are influential even where they are not technically required. And the Committee on Standards in Public Life remains a focal point for deliberation on emerging issues of relevance.

When he was ALP shadow communications minister, Lindsay Tanner suggested something like the Nolan Rules for appointments to the ABC board. With shadow treasurer Wayne Swan flagging policy development on RBA board appointments, let's hope the idea catches on.*

Nicholas Gruen *The Courier-Mail* 7dec05

**It already has. In fact, before the last election the Labor party adopted as party policy a method of appointing the board of the ABC based on the Nolan Rules and the other opposition parties support this position.*

Government supporters in the press harp on about bias but the most egregious form of bias is the appointment of the ABC board by the Howard government without scrutiny and without any balance from the other side of politics.

Message from the Board: an excellent year for the country

A word from a director of the ABC, Janet Albrechtsen, writing in *The Australian* 28dec05:

PSSST. Keep this to yourself. John Howard will be with us for a very long time. Even if the Prime Minister hands over the reins to Treasurer Peter Costello in 2006, the Howard imprint will remain for years to come. Looking back on 2005, Howard has put serious runs on the board. He will not be remembered as a do nothing, occupy the crease kind of PM.

It has been a momentous year for the conservative cause. Howard has become for Australia what Ronald Reagan was to the US and Margaret Thatcher to Britain. Plenty of politicians spend a lifetime gaining power and, when it comes, are so busy holding on to it that they shy away from controversial but much needed reform. Think of Malcolm Fraser

Howard, on the other hand, is changing Australia to reflect the way we work, the way we raise our children, the way we're educated, the sorts of things we expect governments to do and, more to the point, the things we want to do for ourselves.

Of course, Howard is far from the perfect conservative. He has thrown tax dollars at failed businesses, set up slush

funds to massage the passage of reforms (voluntary student unionism, Telstra), and continues to prop up and pander to powerful lobbies (pharmacists). Not to mention his obscene election spending sprees. But, then, reform comes at a price. And Howard is on the reform path.

Critics go bonkers at the idea of Howard changing Australia. The level of vitriol aimed at the Prime Minister on each of these issues is testimony not only to the significance of these changes but also to the fact Howard is overturning long entrenched vested interests, be it in the workplace, on campus, in indigenous politics and so on.

Howard's critics imagine he has some spooky Svengali-like influence over that dumb animal farm known as the Australian electorate. But, then, Howard haters are forced to talk down to voters rather than 'fess up to the fact the PM may be on to something with policies based on empowering individuals to make their own decisions, thus neutering a whole swag of elites who would prefer to call the shots. No wonder his critics are becoming more feral every day.

No comment.

Let's set the matter straight. Defending advertisement-free public broadcasting is neither left-wing prejudice nor self-indulgence, it is simply a rational choice of publicly funded, but not government controlled, broadcasting. A bit like publicly funded universities. Or libraries, art galleries, orchestras, national parks and any of the other cultural institutions that the people agree to support collectively. Even Parliament.

There is a view of broadcasting that it is naturally a commercial enterprise which God intended to be paid for by advertising revenue. According to this view, publicly funded broadcasting is, indeed, an indulgence and something that is tacked onto the end of "real" broadcasting. But there is another view, developed by public-spirited people in times gone by. They looked first at the fact that broadcasting was carried on the public radio frequencies and decreed that first claim to those scarce frequencies should be a form of radio designed for the public good.

Broadcasting has an important cultural function, particularly on such a large continent with such a small population. It is a unifying medium that fosters a sense of identity within an improbable nation.

Taxes are the way we buy civilisation, and public broadcasting is an institution of civilisation. Many of us never listen to commercial radio or watch commercial television, but we are still taxed for it. Every tube of toothpaste that I buy includes in the price a tax to pay for advertising. My money is being conscripted to pay for someone else's entertainment. And there is no way that I can escape the tax or redirect the revenue to my preferred form of broadcasting.

By international comparisons, the ABC is a miserably funded, ultra-frugal public broadcaster. It does more for less than any comparable corporation. And by domestic comparisons, the ABC provides television and radio services on several networks, Australia-wide, for less than it costs the run the Ten television network. And for those who argue that advertising has no effect on content quality, I can only say: compare *Four Corners* with *60 Minutes* and tell me that it doesn't make a difference. Or imagine what might be missing from your library if it stocked only books sponsored by Coca-Cola, Kellogg's, McDonald's, Shell and General Motors. The shelves in the nutrition and environment sections would be pretty bare.

Terry Lane *The Age* 16/8/03

Taken from an article based on the Second Bruce Allen Memorial Lecture held at Macquarie University Sydney 12nov04. Kerry O'Brien is presenter of the 7.30 Report

This is not an exercise in painting all journalists as white knights and all the media-minding industry as the black knights. There is a legitimate and useful interface between the two that can facilitate good, honest journalism. Equally there is legitimacy in the various institutions of society – public and private – in protecting themselves against incompetent, inaccurate, lazy or dishonest journalism. But I believe the balance is increasingly and unhealthily out of kilter in the way the game is played today, weighted towards the information managers and away from the information gatherers.

This isn't just about journalists gathering basic, practical information and disseminating it in a way that helps keep society going. At the heart of what we're about is the burning need to scrutinise. It's been said many times before tonight: power corrupts. The more power that accrues, the greater the temptation and opportunity for corruption of one kind or another. It's often a subtle process. And, as the wisdom goes, absolute power corrupts absolutely. That's not some kind of warped prejudice or paranoia on my part. History, including recent history, is littered with examples.

The bottom line is that we do need to remind ourselves from time to time that there really is a noble cause along with the excitement, the adrenalin, the travel (if you're lucky), the glamour (if you can find it) and meeting all those interesting people. It's part of the process two Governors-General – Sir William Dean and Sir Zelman Cowan – were referring to when they talked about reflecting a nation to itself. It's telling the stories of our society; it's plotting our path through history; and importantly it's keeping the system honest.

I continue to believe passionately that a strong, well-funded, genuinely independent public broadcaster is a critical element in that equation. I don't believe the ABC we have today is well funded. At the program level we've experienced a funding decline in real terms over the last decade. Our resources are diminished, which does impact on how we make our stories and access our interviews.

We've also seen from the Hawke years through to the Howard years an increasing tendency to make ABC board appointments that appear to be uncomfortably, indeed unacceptably, close to government. Some of our general programming today is dictated by specific funding from the government, which I think is an unhealthy situation. It gives at least the perception of reducing the independence of decision-making inside the ABC.

The ABC's integrity has never been under more sustained attack than it has been in the past decade – endless carping complaints of systemic bias and seemingly endless processes of scrutiny, none of which support the broad charge. I deplore the mindset of those who will never be convinced that there is no systemic bias, no matter how consistently they fail to prove otherwise. But on the other hand I welcome healthy scrutiny. And no matter how much our critics carp, the level of public respect and affection for dear old Auntie never wavers. The ABC recently released its latest opinion poll conducted independently by Newspoll – they've done them before – and nothing's changed. The audience approval of the 7pm news as fair and balanced, has run at 95, 93 and 94 per cent over the past three years. For *The 7.30 Report* it's 89, 87 and 89 per cent over the same three-year period.

And it's one reason why I remain optimistic today that we can keep the flame alive – because I believe our audience is still responding to the pursuit of excellence, the pursuit of quality that thankfully they can still discern in our programming.

The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the author and cannot be construed in any way as reflecting the views of his employer.

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