

background briefing

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of the abc

Public broadcasting threatened

Senator Coonan, Minister for Communications, not long ago promised an exciting year ahead for the ABC. Exciting for the government perhaps as it arrogantly rushed the Bill to abolish the position of staff-elected director on the Board, and soon after completed its stack of the Board with a third ideological warrior and a generous supporter of the Liberal party who knows all about hotels and gambling.

What an achievement: not one person on the Board with any experience or knowledge of broadcasting (including the new managing director); not one person with a background in media technology; not one person – except for the soon-to-retire chairman – who has expressed any commitment to public broadcasting. This is the most opportunist and cynical stack of the Board in the history of the ABC. (It lost no time in ditching Chris Masters' biography of Alan Jones, who is a good mate of the PM and probably one of the best mates of the Board cabal.)

The Australian editorial writer is in ecstasy. 'John Howard has finally begun to make a dent in the left-wing collectivist culture of the national broadcaster.' The lefties will soon be driven out so that the ABC can be pulled into line with the rest of the media soon to be shared out between News Ltd and PBL. Will the ABC go the way of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and SBS? It is a possibility. Online advertising could be the Trojan horse of advertising on the ABC.

With the Government's grip on the ABC tightening and the projected changes to the rules governing media ownership being relaxed, the media scene will be radically changed and Australian democracy will be the worse for it.

Reviews 1996 & 2005

In 1996 the Howard government set up the Mansfield review to advise on cutting back on ABC functions following the huge slash to its budget. Mansfield received 10,615 submissions, which was a record. (A similar review of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at that time attracted only 150 responses – go to page 7 to see what happened to CBC.)

On the day before the release of the Mansfield Report, Laura Tingle of *The Age* published leaked cabinet papers which included the comment from Sen Alston that 'the impending cuts would enhance the government's ability to influence ABC activities'. *The Age* editorial the next day said, 'Whatever Mr Mansfield recommends, and however Senator Alston responds, the Government will not find it easy to restore public confidence in its motives with regard to the ABC.'

That confidence has never been restored.

The government never made a formal response to Mansfield's review or to Mansfield himself. They must have been sadly disappointed by the public submissions and Bob Mansfield's report.

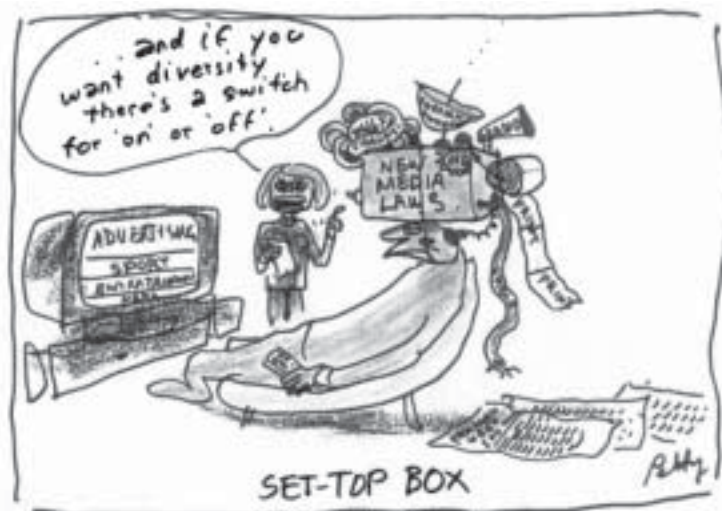
At least the Mansfield report was published.

Senator Coonan has refused to release the KPMG report on its review of the efficiency and funding adequacy of the ABC. We, the taxpayers, paid for it; it's our ABC and we must demand to see it.

The last thing the Government wants is good publicity for the ABC as it unleashes its augmented board on the public broadcaster.

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Thanks to Bruce Petty

Like one of those heroic panoramas of the Western Front - the sun breaking through clouds over a landscape of craters, barbed wire and mud - *Whose ABC?* surveys a battlefield where the dead are many and the trenches have barely shifted in 20 years.

You reckon the Howard Government has been tough on the national broadcaster? Ken Inglis has the detail to convince even the Liberal Party faithful. But the opening pages of his fine, calm, massive narrative of the ABC since 1983 waste no time plunging into the broadcaster's long brawl with Bob Hawke and Labor. The catalyst? Richard Carleton's famous question: "Mr Hawke, could I ask you whether you were feeling a little embarrassed tonight at the blood that's on your hands?"

Hawke found ABC reporters impertinent. They attacked his friends. Chris Masters's investigation into judicial corruption in NSW, *The Big League* - screened only after a highly principled stand by the ABC board and its chairwoman, Dame Leonie Kramer - inspired grudges in Labor's Right that are still alive today. Within a year, the new prime minister was convinced the ABC was out to get him and Hawke began threatening revenge. His treasurer, Paul Keating, would make the biggest cuts in ABC funding for 50 years.

Whose ABC? is a history of old themes playing themselves out from government to government. Prime ministers always bully and the ABC often buckles. There is never enough money to make programs. The board always leaks. Restructures don't last. Managing directors never see out their term. Few ABC board directors know a thing about running big corporations.

The nastiest brawls with government involve the bruised feelings of our neighbours. The Nationals are the broadcaster's best political friends. Politicians can dream of advertising on the ABC but the commercial networks are damned if they'll share their revenues with the national broadcaster.

And how has it survived? Because passionate allegations of bias that go back to the earliest days of the ABC have never convinced the public. Newspoll found in 2004 that more than 90 per cent of respondents thought ABC reporting of news and current affairs was "balanced and even handed".

Inglis has a soft voice, a dry sense of humour and a biographer's respect for character. His portraits are superb: the tornado of David Hill, the inky Mark Armstrong, Melbourne's failed agent of change Michael Kroger, the silken mandarin Donald McDonald and the catastrophe he hired and fired, Jonathan Shier.

The rise and fall of Shier is the thrilling climax of this book. So many knew what the problems were yet he still got the gig. Headhunters kept going back to London for new references: "Most of them dwelt on his nationality, interpreting his abrasive behaviour as a display of national rather than individual personal traits which they

assumed would not trouble other Australians." He couldn't hold his temper; he couldn't keep executives; he couldn't explain his plans; his restructure was unworkable; he ran up huge bills for redundancies; and audiences drifted away. Yet Shier hung onto his job for 19 months because he offered Canberra - and sections of the board - the El Dorado of change.

The narrative spine of *Whose ABC?* is the search for change. Readers should be warned that Inglis takes seriously his duty to record all the many restructures and the comings and goings provoked by change at the top and the starvation of funds, particularly over the past decade. He writes that by 2005, "the money available for program-making was \$60 million less than in 1995-96".

But the result of this financial bludgeoning has been reform not revolution. Ideological detractors of the ABC blame this on Marxist-inspired opposition in the ranks - and it's true that change has been resisted at times with operatic fervour at Ultimo and Gore Hill. But Inglis reveals a deeper reason: no one really has yet imagined what this different ABC would look like - except that it would be different somehow, less interested in lesbians and Aborigines and kinder to the government of the day.

Inglis reckons threats to privatise the ABC are over and Canberra is stuck with the place because - despite all the excesses recorded in this fat book - it's what Australians want.

Twice the Howard Government has sent in experts to look the place over as a prelude to taking it apart. In went Bob Mansfield - ex-Fairfax, ex-Optus - in 1996 and management consultants KPMG in 2005. They came to much the same conclusion. Mansfield recommended, "That the ABC should continue to be the public broadcaster so cherished by Australians."

Whose ABC? doesn't answer all the questions. It can't. Its great achievement is to chart the terrain on which the heroes and hucksters of our public life have been brawling for the past 20 years. It's remarkable living history.

smh 8aug06

Thanks to The Advertiser



Still broadcasting without fear or favour?

Ken Inglis

“Mr Windschuttle’s appointment seems to me the most provocative ever made.”

The Melbourne *Herald-Sun* reported on May 23, 2006 that the Howard Government had announced the appointment of Mark Scott, former Fairfax executive, as managing director of the ABC for the next five years.

In fact the Howard Government had done no such thing. The chairman of the ABC’s board, Donald McDonald, had announced the appointment and John Howard’s Minister for Communications, Senator Helen Coonan, had welcomed it. This mistake was not trivial. The report betrayed, and further disseminated, a serious misunderstanding of the ABC’s character as a statutory authority.

When the Australian Broadcasting Commission was constituted in 1932, parliament gave the governing body [the ABC board] the power to choose the chief executive. The legislation turning the Commission into a Corporation, drafted for Malcolm Fraser’s Government and carried through by Bob Hawke’s in 1983, retained that provision.

The ABC has never enjoyed complete autonomy in its relationship with politicians, and never will, depending as it does almost entirely on public funding; but that clause in the Act is a precious protector of its freedom to broadcast without fear or favour.

Misunderstanding of the arrangement has long been remarkably widespread. Though the board’s choice of Brian Johns as managing director in 1995 was welcomed at the time within both the Labor Government and the Opposition, the Sydney Morning Herald nevertheless proclaimed Johns “Labor’s choice”; and later, in *The Age*, Ken Davidson named both Johns and his predecessor David Hill as cases in which “the Hawke-Keating Government appointed its men to the top job”.

The appointment of Jonathan Shier, managing director from March 2000 until the board induced him to resign less than 18 months later, also became in retrospect a government job. Having interviewed nearly everybody involved in the selection I can find little or no evidence of political pressure on Mr Shier’s behalf.

But Robert Manne in the *Herald* and *The Age* looks back on the appointment as the Howard Government’s “attempt to take control of the ABC”; the publisher Richard Walsh cites it among “a string of inappropriate appointments” made by the Howard Government; and Juliette Hughes in *Eureka Street* can say that Howard “installed as boss Jonathan Shier to run the organisation into the ground”.

Just how such misreadings have arisen and persisted is a puzzle I explore in my book.* Sometimes they rest on pure ignorance. At other times they betray a suspicion, which mellows into a conviction, that the government must really have been the agent, whatever the formalities.

Appointing the managing director is not, however, as Gerald Henderson asserted in the *Herald* on June 20, the

only important decision the board makes. Over the years, documents and reminiscences reveal a continuous negotiation, usually but not always amicable, between board and management over where the border is to be drawn between the territories for which each is responsible.

The ABC might have abandoned Radio Australia in 1997 but for the resistance of a narrow majority on the Board. In 1999 Brian Johns announced that subject to Board endorsement the ABC would do a lucrative deal licensing Telstra to take material from ABC Online. The board deferred endorsement, and eventually accepted Jonathan Shier’s recommendation that the deal be aborted.

This scheme might well have gone ahead, for good or ill, but for strenuous lobbying against it by the staff-elected director on the board, Kirsten Garrett. The government has lately used its newly gained majority in the Senate to remove that board member. It has also appointed three new members, Ron Brunton, Janet Albrechtsen and Keith Windschuttle, who had been severe public critics of ABC programming policy.

Mr Windschuttle’s appointment seems to me the most provocative ever made. Last year he said in a lecture that the ABC should be commercialised in order to break its Marxist culture. The Minister, as Errol Simper observes in *The Australian*, as “all but publicly invited the ABC board to consider advertising”. Recent appointments may well have yielded a majority on the board favourable to that innovation.

From the beginning of 2007 the board will have a new Chairman. Donald McDonald, who has held that position for ten years, and has done at least as much as any of his predecessors, I believe, to protect the traditional character of the ABC.

What if the new Chairman (to be chosen by the end of the year) were to ask the government on behalf of the board to clear the way for advertising by amending the Act? So long as no Coalition Senator defected, that could be done as briskly as the abolition of the staff-elected directorship. The new managing director would then be managing an organisation rather different from the one that has been nurturing our culture for the past 74 years.

Online Opinion posted 10aug06



Thanks to Bruce Petty

What are the essential roles of a public broadcaster? Elsewhere in this edition, in *News for Parrots*, we suggest that one key function is to provide a public forum where the nation can talk to itself.

Another essential role is to hold powerful individuals and institutions up to scrutiny – to shine “the disinfectant of sunlight” on the activities of governments and oppositions, union officials and business leaders alike.

In the ABC decisions about stories which might embarrass powerful people are usually made by the relevant editorial manager; however, when there is the prospect of costly defamation procedures, the matter may be referred to the Board.

How the Board has dealt with two reports by Chris Masters, one of Australia’s most respected investigative journalists, is worth recalling.

In 1983 Masters has prepared a Four Corners program which investigated corruption in Rugby League. In the program a reconstructed scene, based on sources which Masters believed reliable, showed the Chief Magistrate of New South Wales, Murray Farquhar, telling other Magistrates that the Labor Premier, Neville Wran, had instructed that Kevin Humphries, accused of defrauding the Balmain Leagues Club of \$50,000, was not to be committed for trial.

Such an allegation had the potential to bring down the Premier and the Chief Magistrate. If the allegations proved unfounded, it also had the potential to damage the reputation of the ABC, as well award Farquhar and Wran substantial damages against the ABC. Wran had been invited to appear in the program. He declined, and threatened to sue for defamation. However both the ABC legal department and external senior counsel said that the program was defensible.

The then ABC Chairman was Dame Leonie Kramer. After consulting two other Board members located

in Sydney, Kramer agreed that the broadcast should proceed. Both Wran and Farquhar sued. A subsequent Royal Commission found against Farquhar, who was later imprisoned, but exonerated Wran. Wran’s defamation action was later settled out of court.

Now, some twenty-three years later, a decision on the publication of a biography of Alan Jones written by Chris Masters was also considered by the Board. Once again the issue of a possible defamation action arose. Once again, both internal and external legal advice was that the publication was defensible. This time the book was canned.

The nervousness over the Jonestown issue seems to revolve around a possible suggestion in the book that Jones is gay. A number of commentators have doubted that it is any longer defamatory to suggest that someone is gay, and even if it were such an accusation hardly compares to suggestions that senior political and judicial figures acted to pervert the course of justice.

What then has happened in the twenty three years since the Farquhar case? One explanation is that the Board has simply lost its courage, while the other, put forward by ABC management on behalf of the Board is that lower standards apply to the ABC’s commercial activities, including its book publishing arm.

Whichever explanation you accept, the Board has let the ABC down.

Thanks to Bill Leak



Razer's edginess

ABC broadcaster Helen Razer's decision to hit the dump button when distinguished film maker Bob Weis began to criticise ABC Board member Keith Windschuttle indicates how nervous some ABC staff had become.

Razer and Weis were discussing Weis's film *Women of the Sun*, which had compared the position of Aborigines in Australia to Holocaust survivors. According to an *Age* report, Weis said "while David Irving, the Holocaust denier, sits in prison the Australian Government . . .", before he was cut off. Weis said that he intended to conclude the sentence with "has put our chief Holocaust denier on the board of the ABC." This was an apparent reference to Keith Windschuttle, whose book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* has argued that the massacres of Aborigines had been exaggerated.

While we can have some sympathy for Razer, it seems that she acted prematurely in cutting Weis off. In a newspaper situation if you fear something may be defamatory you have time to reflect on it, or even get a legal opinion. In live radio, you have seven seconds to make a judgement.

The most likely explanation is that the continued attacks on ABC staff by Windschuttle and a range of other right wing commentators have made ABC journalists unduly nervous. Windschuttle may well have been annoyed and offended by being compared to David Irving, but it is doubtful that such a comparison is defamatory. Razer is a feisty and experienced broadcaster; her action in this case was out of character, but may well have been a reflection of the current climate within the ABC. DC

Good evening. Here is the news for parrots. No parrots were involved in an accident on the M1 today, when a lorry carrying high-octane fuel was in collision with a bollard ... that is a BOLLARD and not a PARROT. A spokesman for parrots said he was glad no parrots were involved. The Minister of Technology [photo of minister with parrot on his shoulder] today met the three Russian leaders (cut to photograph of Brahnev, Podgomy and Kosygin all in a group and each with a parrot on his shoulder) to discuss a £4 million airliner deal ... [cut back to narrator] None of them went in the cage, or swung on the little wooden trapeze, or ate any of the nice millet seed yum, yum. That's the end of the news....

Monty Python's Flying Circus - Episode 20

"There's no such thing as society" is perhaps the best remembered of Margaret Thatcher's statements. What she said was wishful thinking rather than a statement of fact, but if the attacks on public service broadcasting, in both the UK and Australia, succeed, Thatcher's wish may indeed become true.

Opponents of public broadcasting are arguing that it is an anachronism in the digital age. Hundreds and potentially thousands of channels are available through Pay TV. The diversity of subject matter on the Internet is staggering. Virtually anyone can start their own blog. Virtually anyone can become a regular international broadcaster, as my nineteen year old son has been for the past year or so, by producing their own weekly podcast in their bedroom.

However there are already signs that this may be leading to a fragmentation of audiences. While audiences appear to be fragmenting, and while the number of different voices on the airwaves, or in cyberspace, are growing, the big players, Microsoft and Murdoch, Bertelsmann and Berlusconi are standing at the gateway. They don't control that gateway, but they have a great deal of influence over where users choose to travel.

British anthropologist, Professor Georgina Born, the author of *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*, in conversation with Gerald Tooth on Radio National's Media Report, explained the critical role of public service broadcasters in the development of public opinion in the U.K:

...really, until the advent of national radio in the '20s and growing in the '30s, there was no such thing as a national public, and no such thing as a national culture to speak of. There were various sorts of bands of elite publics [or sub-cultures], and there was of course a growing labour movement and working class identity. But the creation of this pan-class, truly national kind of body of opinion, depended on broadcasting's arrival. It's a very powerful argument, and I think its intimate links with the growth of mass democracy and universal suffrage are crucial.

While the BBC, and the ABC, have played a key role in establishing a universal public sphere that is necessary for effective democracy, their representation of the national culture has often been, in Georgina Born's words "flattening, monolithic and homogenous" . National broadcasters need to be "responsive to new groups in society to the diversity, the heterogeneity, to multiculturalism, to indigenous peoples' voices and so on".

Public service broadcasters, as the ABC Charter makes explicit, must both contribute to unity, to "a sense of national identity" at the same time as they celebrate diversity and "take account of the multicultural nature of the community".

Professor Born was critical of some Australian academics who she said had over emphasised the need to represent diversity to the point that fragmentation of audiences was in danger was threatening the need for unification.

We need a universal public because it mirrors our political system, the Federal political system. We need a space in which all those micro publics can talk to the majority, and the majority can be expected to listen. And only mass channels provide that kind of universal space, now that for example a newspaper market is more and more segmented as well.

Put simply, while specialist services for sub-cultures - parrots, stamp collectors or cricket fanatics - are important, so too is a national forum in which we can all take part.

Ken Inglis, in his recently published *Whose ABC? The Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983-2006*, made a similar point:

All in all it is likely that viewers and listeners in the digital age will become even more reliant on public broadcasters for electronic representation of their nation's character, and the human condition There is plenty of life yet in the adage about the ABC and its equivalents elsewhere, that they address their audiences as citizens, not consumers.

Narrator: And while that's going on, here is the news for gibbons. No gibbons were involved today in an accident on the M1 ...

In our next and last issue for the year we will expand on the issue of public broadcasting and its place in a democratic country. We welcome your letters on this topic (and others). Get your letter in by November 10 and please keep it succinct.

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Evolution must embrace digital, not advertising

Quentin Dempster

Quentin Dempster, whose staff-elected position was abolished before he could take it up, argues that there are bigger issues facing the ABC than who is on the board. But is this board equipped to handle them in the public interest?

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE ON THE ABC BOARD? It is all highly diverting and a bit of a hoot. But when the digital revolution is transforming online, print, radio and television media globally, what Australia desperately needs is a board that understands the exciting possibilities for enhancing the quality, programming range, innovation, reach, professional training and public value of the ABC.

And all we get from the federal Government is tired, old, adversarial, party-political patronage and ideological influence peddling.

Podcasting is taking off. Web TV is ready to take off. So, too, is click-per-view video. Digital radio is ready to take off. Free-to-air digital multichannelling is ready to take off.

Australia has the capacity to exploit the extraordinary capacity of digital free-to-air broadcasting, with the ability to split the transmission into 35 standard-definition channels. An FTA [free-to-air] set-top box costs about \$100. It is a once-only cost compared with \$50 to \$100 a month for Foxtel's multichannels or \$30 to \$100 a month for an internet service provider.

FTA digital is extraordinary. For the public broadcasters we could have English and other language channels, multiple technical, skills and further education channels, community access, arts, culture, history, documentary and innovation channels. As well, there could be fully commercial entertainment, information and sports channels locally and networked. The public broadcasters' contribution to a digital Australia could be funded by the sale of digital spectrum to the commercial operators.

The analog transmission could be switched off by January 2008 rather than the present 2010-12 vague deadline. (Incidentally, simulcasting in analog and digital is costing the ABC, that is taxpayers, \$143 million a year.)

For the public broadcasters, the costs of production of content are coming down with digital cameras and desktop editing. This can breathe new life into regional and rural services as well as high-end drama and documentary.

Yet all we get from the Government is Windschuttle and a still formally undeclared agenda to make the ABC board consider fully commercialising the ABC's output, first through online advertising and then, perhaps, through free-to-air radio and TV advertising.

theforum@theaustralian.com.au 22jun06

ABC advertising is here

Quentin Dempster

I want to speak briefly about the latest initiative of the ABC Board to establish a third party website called Countdown.com.au. Media Watch reported last Monday that the website took advertising. In a letter to the program, our new managing director Mark Scott said the Countdown website was a wholly-owned ABC site set up by ABC Enterprises to develop new business revenue streams through product and content sales, merchandising, downloading ... and advertising.

Mr Scott seemed to imply that an ABC website taking advertising was not unprecedented as ABC-published magazines like ABC Cricket or Delicious or Gardening Australia had all taken advertising.

There is a difference, I believe. In the digital revolution broadcasting is morphing into cybercasting. I note on the ABC's Countdown website there's video streaming, blooper video clips, rare behind the scenes video footage that a Countdown Club member can click per view.

I think it is time for the ABC Board to table the legal advice on which it relies for its approval of cybercast advertising. My obvious fear is that the ABC Board is only one small step away from making a disastrous decision to allow advertising on the mainstream ABC website – one of the most trusted and most used in the country.

The ABC Act Section 31(1) says: "The Corporation shall not broadcast or televise advertisements". That is the black letter spirit and intent of the ABC Act. I know it was written before the internet was invented but the Act and the Charter sets out quite clearly the ABC's public purpose. Countdown.com is the thin edge of the wedge for ABC broadband/cybercast advertising. It trades off the one piece of integrity we have ... the ABC's perceived non-commercial character. It involves a substantial commitment of resources and financial risk and a large amount of public angst ... and for what? Pin money.

The financial returns will never and can never be realised because the stated desire of government is to lessen the drain of the ABC on the public purse. Hence any profits gained will be matched over time by a lessening of the operational base funding appropriation. It's a zero sum game. A no brainer.

If the central public purpose of the ABC does not hold, if the centre continues to be hollowed out, the ABC will fly apart. That is what the ABC is risking under the McDonald Board.

An extract from an address by broadcaster Quentin Dempster, ABC staff-elected director (in exile), to the Communications and Media Law Association seminar. 3aug06

Take CBC back to its role as a public broadcaster, says report ABC board take note

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is in danger of losing its way, "must ... stop competing with the private sector to fulfil its mandate", urges a major Senate report. The report also calls on the federal government to beef up rules to prevent media consolidation and greater authority to review proposed media mergers. The report, three years in the making, urges the federal government to lead the CBC, particularly the television side, back to its role as a public broadcaster.

The CBC has a duty to provide Canadians with quality, commercial-free programming that doesn't focus on attracting higher ratings, the report says.

"CBC has to get back to its roots," said Senator Jim Munson, a member of the Senate's transport and communications committee, which issued the report. "We want the CBC to complement what's going on in the private sector, not necessarily compete."

Significant budget cuts by the federal government of about 20% since the early 1990s have forced it to compromise its mandate and seek advertising revenue as if it were a private broadcaster, the report says.

The cutbacks have "forced CBC television to focus on ratings rather than on its core mandate, public broadcasting." The committee urges the government to commit to a long-term budget that provides stable funding to help the CBC return to its roots.

It also urged that appointments to the CBC's board of directors should undergo parliamentary review.

AAP 20jul06

SENATOR JIM MUNSON was interviewed by Gerald Tooth on Radio National's The Media Report of July 27. Munson told him: "We feel the CBC, as a public broadcaster, should get back to the basics. And we've said: 'Get out of advertising.' The Government should have a 10-year program, a sustainable funding program, for the CBC to do what it's done best in the past: give Canadians Canadian content, Canadian news and so forth. We've ruffled a few feathers with our recommendations. But we feel it's very important."

Tooth: We're here in Australia talking about the possibility of the ABC carrying advertising. Why have you made the recommendation to move away from that commercial component and how would the CBC continue to be funded at the level it is if it doesn't have advertising?"

Munson: "We believe in public funding. In Canadian dollars the CBC receives \$1 billion (\$A1.15 billion)* a year from public funds, not very much when you think about that sort of thing. And CBC receives \$400 million (\$A470 million) from advertising. We think the shortfall can be made up with the public. For example, listening to CBC radio in this country is a treasure. I come from private broadcasting and I understand private broadcasting and understand the advertising revenue stream. But what the CBC in this country gives us is a mature, independent, public voice, the only public voice in this country. If we allowed advertising on CBC radio, on which there is (presently) no advertising, I think it would be the death knell of our public broadcasting system."

*At \$A1.15m of public funding plus \$A470m from advertising, the CBC considers itself 'one of the worst-funded public broadcasters in the world'. The equivalent for the ABC is \$A660m (plus \$143m for transmission).

SBS to place ads in redefined 'natural breaks'

The numerous people who don't want program interruption, possibly 99 per cent of viewers insofar as can be judged from the scribe's mail, might be dismayed by a recently released SBS document entitled "Guidelines for the placement of commercial breaks in SBS television programs". In truth, dismayed may be one of the great understatements.

The guidelines reveal, for example, that with drama and comedy SBS now believes a break is acceptable when there is "an obvious and dramatically significant lapse of time in the action". Or, a break can be inserted should there be "a change of scene" or "a change of characters".

With documentaries, once SBS's programming strength, a commercial break can be occasioned by "a change of topic". A break could even occur should there be "a change of method or treatment" or should "new participants" be introduced. With news and current affairs, SBS believes a commercial break is in order "between separate items in news bulletins and program segments in current affairs".

There's more, a great deal more, but you'll have already got the broader picture. In other words, SBS appears intent on creating a set of guidelines which will allow it to insert commercials pretty well anywhere, at any time, and into pretty well anything. The only difference between SBS and Ten, Nine or Seven will be that SBS will be, at least notionally, confined to five minutes an hour of commercial material.

How long it'll be content with five minutes an hour might be something Free Television Australia (the commercial television lobby, not known for any frenetic enthusiasm for a fourth free-to-air commercial channel) might want to ponder. SBS plans three slots for commercials in a half-hour program. If the scribe's mathematics are correct, and based on normal program running-times, this means a block of commercials every eight minutes. Hour-long programs will be interrupted every 13 minutes.

It's quite a prospect, is it not? Yes, we can hear the enthusiastic cheering and stamping out there.

Errol Simper Media The Australian 31aug06

Unholy alliance of the Right-Wing Commentariat and Government

The ABC is under constant attack in *The Australian* and other Murdoch newspapers

Political power in Western democracies is no longer just a matter of gaining an electoral mandate in the form of a parliamentary majority. It is more and more becoming a matter of gaining control of the (electronic) media as well. i

Whose ABC?, Ken Inglis' book on the ABC, is in part a story of the battle for control of the ABC by governments since 1983. [My words, not Professor Inglis's.] Part of the reason for the greater success of the Howard government in intimidating and crippling the ABC is the co-operation it receives from the Murdoch press in general and the 'right-wing commentariat'* in particular. Andrew West sees this as a kind of organised league of interests:

This form of 'movement' commentary/activism is lifted straight from the playbook of American conservatism, which has worked so well for its practitioners. You disperse your supporters throughout the media and think tanks and make sure they all parrot the same line. As David Brock, a former 'movement' journalist in Washington ... revealed in his 2002 mea culpa, *Blinded by the Right*, this chorus helps build a momentum, a feeling of inevitability and unanimity for certain policies. ii

In online magazine *New Matilda* Andrew West examines: the vast conspiracy involving the Liberal Right and much of the News Limited press to keep Labor out of office federally and destroy an already weakened labour movement.

Not only do Murdoch's newspapers barrack unstintingly for Howard at election time, between polls they keep readers on a drip-feed of government propaganda.

The ideological lock step .. of Piers Ackerman in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*, Andrew Bolt in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* and the Prime Minister's office is well-documented. Ackerman and Bolt ... consider themselves part of the 'movement' whose duty it is to echo, through (very skilful) populist repackaging the official line of the current federal government, be it on industrial relations, the Iraq war, or national security laws. ii

And of course the ABC.

But when strategically placed commentators dutifully echo the party line to achieve a common aim — the perpetuation of the Howard Government — let's call it what it is: a Right-wing conspiracy. It's not in the shadows, but it's a conspiracy nonetheless. ii

Murdoch wields immense power with his control of media organisations worldwide; he dominates the commercial media worldwide. His perceived rivals are the public broadcasters in Britain and Australia, the BBC and the ABC. For at least the last 3 years there has been a cabal of *The Australian* newspaper and the Howard government, and one of its most hated targets has been the ABC.

This can be seen very clearly in *The Australian's* consistent support for the Government's policy on funding private schools and its attacks on public education and the teaching of English and history, for example. But it is most vicious in its denigration of the ABC and its alleged bias.

The covert policy of the government is to rid the ABC of its 'capture' by so-called 'left-wing' producers and presenters.

Jonathan Shier decimated the program makers when he was let loose on the ABC in 2000, bringing it to its knees at great cost, human and financial, before the Board came to its senses and manoeuvred his removal after only 19 months. We – Friends of the ABC – heaved a countrywide sigh of relief and trusted that a lesson had been learnt. Not so. The campaign waged by the Commentariat (and ambitious Liberal senators) has been unceasing and has been ramped up since the Coalition gained control of the Senate.

Well, it's amazing what a Senate majority can do. The Government knows that it can now ram through any changes it feels like to the corporate culture of the ABC. It knows the Labor Party is utterly distracted by its own melancholia and frustration. And it knows that the elitist, Howard-boosting commentariat from the commercial press would love another chance to deride what it sees as the soft-Left social engineers at the ABC. i

The noises from Canberra suggest the temptation to mould the ABC to the Government's liking is strong. To some conservative ideologues, the existence of the ABC in its present form is an anathema, a hangover from an age when government intervention in certain industries was considered in the national interest. Yet the ABC's staunchest critics sometimes have difficulty identifying what they dislike about the concept of a public broadcaster. iii

One can quibble at the notion of John Howard 'dispensing his supporters throughout the media' but the columnists mentioned have long supported Mr Howard and are united in their failure to make any criticism. Some are regular 'couch commentators' on the ABC's *Insiders* and others have regular commenting stints on, for example, RN's *Breakfast*. None seem able to acknowledge the irony of this.

Joan Laing

* Journalists who no longer report the news but support the Government in opinion columns.

i Jose Borghino *New Matilda* 5apr06

ii Andrew West *New Matilda* 19jul06

iii Editorial *The Age* 28mar06

iv Wayne Sanderson *Crikey* 6jul06

Lectures from *The Australian* about bias are like lessons in airline safety from Osama bin Laden – hypocritical and, as it happens, counter-productive. iv

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful. George Orwell

Some Liberal senators have based their careers on pursuing the 'bias' of the ABC. Senator Santoro, now elevated to Minister for Ageing, was wont to hog hours in Senate Estimates pursuing the ABC's alleged bias with literally hundreds of nitpicking questions. He has been replaced by Senator Fierravanti-Wells, who has surpassed Senator Santoro's efforts by perceiving bias in a program she hasn't seen - *Bastard Boys* - because it is still in production. (*Bastard Boys* is a drama about the 1998 water-front dispute.)

QUESTIONS IN THE SENATE on 17th August.

Senator Clare Moore: Does the minister agree with her colleague Senator Fierravanti-Wells that *Bastard Boys* is part of 'an anti-government, pro-left agenda at the ABC?'

In her reply Senator Coonan said:

I have to compliment Senator Fierravanti-Wells - and prior to Senator Fierravanti-Wells taking a particular interest in these issues, Senator Santoro - for having ensured -

Senator Wong: .. condemning a program she hasn't seen.

Senator Coonan continued:

- that the National broadcaster's complaints handling process works appropriately. They are quite right to bring to the attention of the ABC issues that they perceive as being biased and otherwise not delivering on the ABC's charter."

This could be a foretaste of the kind of intervention ABC programming would endure if the government is successful in getting the control over the ABC that it is pursuing, especially when you factor in the funding. The much-trumpeted \$30m in the May budget for ABCTV local content cuts out in three years. So *Bastards* beware. There'll be no more where that \$30m came from unless you conform to the pro-Government agenda of the religious right. JG

"FILTH TARTED UP AS SATIRE"

Quote from Senate Estimates used in ad for The Chaser's War on Everything DVD.

Distorted social view

Recently, in one week there were three articles in *The Australian* abusing the ABC, and hardly a day goes by without a sideswipe of some kind at the ABC and generally several. Sometimes these articles are so inept they do the ABC a favour. One such was by social commentator Bettina Arndt, 14aug06, who is enraged by 'the distorted social view of the ABC'.

"Tune into ABC news or their major current affairs programs you'll hear the endless drum roll of stories banging on about aboriginal issues, the environment, or their latest obsession - banning junk food - plus feminist priorities like domestic violence and sexual abuse." And: "There's a host of social issues that simply never get a run on the ABC because of the blinkered social attitudes of the journalists running the shows."

I found this most unlikely and trawled ABC Online for evidence of the topics allegedly ignored by the ABC. My letter was published in *The Australian* the following day:

"A search on the ABC Online for these topics on ABC programs brought up 174 matches for 'de facto families', 401 for 'research into childcare', 765 for 'single mothers in work', and 177 on the 'effects of divorce on children'. These are across the whole ABC spectrum." I went on to say that "Bettina Arndt herself has had a pretty fair go on the ABC, with 46 mentions of participation in ABC programs. And note that the gripes published yesterday were first broadcast on the ABC, on RN's *Counterpoint*." JL



Thanks to Lindsay

Big Bob Francis: 'am I a normal bloody human being?'

Good question. Magistrates and grannies across Adelaide celebrated the news this morning that radio shock-jock Bob Francis has been sentenced to nine weeks in prison over his comments that a magistrate's face should be smashed in. But the smirk on magistrate Gary Gump's face won't last long since Francis has escaped going to jail - instead he's been fined \$20,000 and been put on an 18-month good behaviour bond after being convicted on two counts of contempt of court.

In October last year Francis used his top-rating evening program on Adelaide's 5AA to discuss the case of Robert John Walker, who'd been charged with possessing child pornography. Walker hadn't entered a

plea at the time, but during the program Francis said Walker was guilty and went on to describe the case as "worse than Snowtown."

"Am I here as a normal bloody human being or do judges live in another world?" said Francis. "Oh, smash the judge's face in." Supreme Court Justice Bleby also fined 5AA station owners Festival City Broadcasters \$80,000.

Crikey suggests that Bob the bully keeps his anger in check by steering clear of talkback callers like Constance, the "stupid old lady" who infuriated Francis so much last year that he called her a "d-ck brain" on air.

Sophie Black Crikey 25aug06

The Brave New Media World

Current proposed changes to cross-media ownership rules and restrictions - tinkering round the edges of media ownership, and the retention of only three free-to-air television networks - have received minimal response in the print media. The new laws have yet to pass the Senate and may still fail or have yet another rejig. We concentrate here on comments opposing the changes. Interestingly, our main source is Crikey.com.

Former Australian Prime Minister, Malcom Fraser:

Let's be clear: the federal government's proposed media law changes will be extremely unhealthy for Australian democracy and for the political management of the country.

If some of the major television and newspaper interests were to merge as a result of these proposed laws, media power would be consolidated in ways that would never have been contemplated in the past.

If a media owner with this level of power decided to turn his guns on one political party, for example, that would almost guarantee that party would lose an election. The power in a few hands would be enormous. And which minister or parliamentarian would risk antagonising a proprietor who possessed so much power?

If the new laws pass, the remaining media owners will have an enormous capacity to influence opinion and ration news. You only have to look at the news and opinion page coverage now between Fairfax and News Limited newspapers to see a major difference - and to see that one of our two major newspaper publishers is already heavily influenced by the views of American neo-conservatives.

In any case, support for the end of the cross-media rules is not, in reality, support for a free market because there are still many regulations left in place. The most important thing is that existing television stations are protected from competition.

And even before any more concentration occurs there is already a severe limitation on Australian media. In my time in politics there were seven or eight major newspaper proprietors, a number which has now been cut in half. The proposed cross-media changes would almost certainly cut the number of proprietors even further - and it says something about the character of a nation that would allow this to happen. *Crikey 28jul06*

TV's moguls learn the masses are revolting
Matthew Ricketson *The Age 26jun06*

The concentration of media ownership, stacking of public broadcasters and the erosion of Parliament's ability to hold the government accountable have made the cross-media laws more relevant today than ever before. Any relaxation of these laws in the current climate will have serious implications for the health of Australian democracy.

Media ownership in Australia is already highly concentrated by OECD standards. This has enabled the major media players, particularly News Ltd and PBL, to have a disproportionate influence on democratic processes. The easing of the cross-media restrictions will lead to a further concentration of media ownership, resulting in a reduction in the diversity of information and opinion available to the public.

Allowing the further concentration of the commercial media sector will harm Australia's democracy. Rather than kowtowing to the major media players, the government should be promoting greater media diversity, re-establishing the independence of the public broadcasters and enhancing the accountability functions of Parliament.

There will be a snatch and grab operation among the country's media companies if the government's proposed reforms for the sector go ahead.

Paul Keating Crikey 24jul06

Helen Coonan's long-awaited media "reform" package fails any rational test of what constitutes good public policy. It promises less diversity of traditional media ownership without the compensation of a liberalised new-media environment ... The "new" digital reform measures still rely on the networks to drive the penetration that would undermine their own economics.

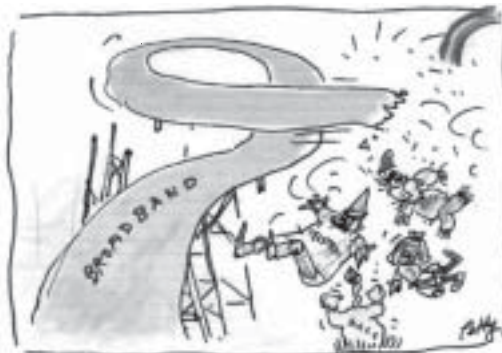
Stephen Bartholomeusz The Age 15jul06

It is a compromise, designed to protect what it can of the excess profits - or "economic rents" - of the free-to-air television oligopoly. It protects the incumbent free-to-air telecasters from the competition made possible by technological change. And in doing so it cheats the consumer - and the wider economy - of the full benefits of the new digital broadcasting technology.

Alan Mitchell Financial Review 17jul06

Thanks to federal government inertia and ignorance, Australia is hobbling along the information superhighway in a dilapidated horse and buggy. Not only do Australians have limited access to broadband internet (the basic platform for the information revolution that is unfolding across the globe), but the speed and bandwidth of our broadband is among the slowest in the developed world.

Crikey 8aug06



Thanks to Bruce Petty

Good Governance?

They really don't care that we are laughing at them. That is, once we have finished gasping. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the appointment of Keith Windschuttle to the ABC board, the latest in a series of appointments that adds up to one of the most ludicrous and tragic board stacks in Australian history.

This is not necessarily a comment on the integrity or abilities of individual appointees, although much could be said. But the last few appointments have been so blatantly political that eye-rolling is the only possible response. It is almost impossible to consider the merits of the individuals in any dispassionate fashion, because the politics so clearly dominates.

Janet Albrechtsen, Ron Brunton and now Keith Windschuttle are three of the most rancorous and vituperative cultural warriors in Australia. None of them have marked themselves out as experts on broadcasting. All of them are best known as polemicists: people of bruising rather than subtle or supple intellect. Yet all three are on the ABC board. One would be fine, even sensible. Three in a row is simply provocative.

Margaret Simons Crikey 16jun06

Emma Dawson has probed more deeply into Keith Windschuttle's past:

'Windschuttle is an exemplar of that curious breed of Australian intellectuals who move inexorably from the far Left to the hard Right over the course of their lives.' She writes of: 'his 1984 belief that the ABC was subject to "relentless and illiberal campaigns ... by conservative politicians and figures ... of the radical Right".'

'This has since been supplanted with his shift to the Right by the view, expressed in a lecture last year entitled *Vilifying Australia* that the ABC has been captured by the "adversary culture" of Left-wing "tertiary educated middle-class professionals" who have "built a culture that even a Board now dominated by conservatives has been unable to displace."'

New Matilda 21jul

Propaganda and the public

David Marr

If the Board has been set up to radically change the culture of the ABC, whatever that might mean, it has powerful and strident support from the Murdoch press in general and *The Australian* in particular. For example:

The ABC has for too long been run by left-wing newsroom collectives insulated from the consequences of their decisions. That the board is finally exercising some control and stepping in where management has in the past failed to is a good thing... If there is to be a national broadcaster, then it must be just that – national – and not appeal solely to its Howard-hating base. This may mark the beginning of everyone's ABC.

Editorial, *The Australian*, 6jul06

Does the public go along with this kind of polemic? Is the public switched off? Does it complain about ABC contempt for the ordinary Australian? Absolutely not.

DAVID MARR WRITES ABOUT THE FICTION OF ABC BIAS

"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.

A couple of years ago, *Readers Digest* asked its Australian subscribers to name the brands and institutions they most trusted. ... 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.

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 KPMG report on ABC funding and efficiency supported every pro-ABC argument.] 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.

Sydney Morning Herald 27jan06

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

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