

## **Friends of the ABC (South Australia) Inc. submission to the ABC SBS Review**

### **NEWS FOR PARROTS**

*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.*  
Monty Python's Flying Circus – Episode 20

No doubt there will be submissions to this inquiry arguing that public broadcasting is an anachronism in the digital age. Hundreds, and potentially thousands of channels are available through Pay TV. The diversity of subject matter, and opinion, on the Internet is staggering. No doubt some of these submissions will argue that if public service broadcasting has any role at all, it is simply to fill in the gaps where the market has failed to provide.

On the contrary Friends of the ABC (SA) believe a strong public service broadcasting sector with broad appeal remains an essential element of Australian democracy.

British anthropologist Georgina Born in her important essay *Digitising Democracy*<sup>i</sup> argues that in multicultural societies (she includes both the U.K and Australia) the public sphere function of a national broadcaster is more important than ever. She notes that in the United States, where there is no public broadcaster with broad appeal, ethnic and cultural minorities have fragmented, and tend not to engage with one another or the broader community.

It is different in the UK, where she argues that alongside “the universal orientation, the ethical and consensual address of mass channels and impartial news functions” (e.g. the BBC as an expression of the public sphere) there needs to be

*...a rich array of communicative channels for the self-representation, participation and expressive narrativisation of minority and marginalised groups, addressed both to and among those groups and to the majority. In this way the architecture of public service communications will encompass both practices of toleration and the politics of presence, and will contribute to the formation of a more adequate communicative democracy that we have yet seen.*

To continue the Monty Python analogy it is not enough for the parrots to have a place to talk to themselves. They also need to engage with other species. Georgina Born put it this way in an interview on Radio National:

*.....we can be at risk of losing sight of the other crucial function which is unification, which is the need for let's call it a universal public. 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.*

There must be room for both diversity and unity. The myriad channels of communication made available through new technologies make it possible for special interest groups to talk among themselves. This is important if they are to avoid being drowned out by louder or more numerous voices. However a critical role of public service broadcasting is to provide a space where everyone can meet on equal terms.

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott talks about the ABC “hosting a national conversation”. As host the ABC is obliged not only to provide a suitable venue, but also to provide accurate and impartial information relevant to that conversation.

For this reason the ABC must be open to scrutiny, both from the public and the parliament. The recently announced changes to the process for appointing members of the ABC board will increase public confidence in the ABC.

If the ABC is to be an effective host it must not only be available to all, but must strive to be used by all. Here is how a recent UNESCO publication put it:

*Universality: Public broadcasting must be accessible to every citizen throughout the country. This is a deeply egalitarian and democratic goal to the extent that it puts all citizens on the same footing, whatever their social status or income. It forces the public broadcaster to address the entire population and seek to be “used” by the largest possible number.<sup>ii</sup>*

Friends of the ABC (SA) submits that those parts of the ABC Charter to that require the ABC to be a comprehensive broadcaster, broadcasting both programs that entertain as well as those that inform, should be retained in the Charter. Similarly the ABC Charter should continue to require the ABC to broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity.

The ABC can only be effective in living up to its obligations if it is actively used by most Australians, which means that a requirement “to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized broadcasting programs” should also remain in the Charter.

However the ABC can only hope to be actively used by most Australians if it is properly funded. By comparison to public broadcasters overseas, and by comparison to commercial broadcasters in Australia, the ABC has been poorly supported.

- On a per capita basis Australia’s two public broadcasters, the ABC and the SBS, get less than half of the taxpayer funds that the BBC receives.<sup>iii</sup>
- The ABC and the SBS together receive more that \$240 million a year less from government than the total revenue of the average commercial TV network. When we take into account that these funds also support the ABC’s extensive radio services, as well as those of the SBS, the mismatch becomes even more apparent.<sup>iv</sup>

**Friends of the ABC (South Australia) requests that the government reaffirm the role of the ABC as a broadcaster with broad appeal and as a vital component in Australia’s cultural and political life. Further that this reaffirmation be made meaningful by adequate funding.**

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.sps.cam.ac.uk/soc/staff/gborn/Digitising\\_Deomocracy.pdf](http://www.sps.cam.ac.uk/soc/staff/gborn/Digitising_Deomocracy.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001415/141584E.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Total licence fee support for the BBC in the twelve months ending March 2005 was 3.1 billion UK pounds. (Source: Media Guardian 7/7/2006, BBC license fee income tops £3bn, guardian.co.uk, , <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/jul/07/bbc.broadcasting1>. viewed 28 July 2008)  
At the July 2008 rate of exchange this translates to \$A6.42 billion.

Total government funding for the ABC in 2005-06 was \$827,269,000 while the SBS received \$176, 472,000. Total for the two Australian public broadcasters was \$1, 003,741,000. (Source: ABC and SBS Annual Reports)

With the Australian population at 20 million and the UK population at 60 million per capita government support for public service broadcasting in the UK was \$107 per year for the UK and \$50 per year for Australia.

<sup>iv</sup> Total revenue for commercial television in the same year (less licence fees to the government for broadcast spectrum, for which SBS does not pay) was \$3738 million. The average was therefore one third of that,\$1246 million.

(Source: Commercial Television Industry Financial Trends, 1978-79 to2005-06, Australian Communications and Media Authority, viewed 28 July 2008, [http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/\\_assets/main/lib310665/commercial\\_tv\\_trends.pdf](http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib310665/commercial_tv_trends.pdf))