

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Friends -not only of the ABC - but certainly as the staff see it – our friends as well. I thought today I would give you a few insights into how the staff see some of the issues facing the ABC today.

As has been mentioned, I spent a term (2002-2004) as deputy to Ramona Koval as Staff Elected Director to the ABC board. I worked closely with Ramona over that period and attended board meetings when she wasn't available. I have to say that I am incredibly disappointed that the government saw fit to abolish the position of Staff Elected Director on the board – seemingly for no better reason than that it was the one position they couldn't influence. From my knowledge and observations of both Ramona and other staff elected directors I can say that often they were the ones who contributed most to discussions within the Board room.

This position has always ensured that at least one member of the Board has an extensive understanding of broadcasting and public broadcasting in particular. They have never been there as some sort of a staff representative but have always acted with a deep understanding of the organisation and a determination to do what is best for the ABC. It is a great loss to both the staff and the ABC as a public institution that this position no longer exists.

It's a sad thing to say but overall I was both surprised and disappointed at the way the board operated. I suppose somewhat naively I had hoped the board would be a group of impressive people who were well-informed, interested and contributed to matters of import – even if I didn't agree with a number of their individual views.

There were some who made a useful and thoughtful contribution – but there were also a number there who in my view didn't see themselves as 'of the ABC' but as outsiders there to pursue an agenda. Nothing as explicit as a overt political agenda but certainly bringing a particular world view and their view of the ABC as a biased organisation that needed the culture changing. Often these board members were very poorly informed about issues of real substance to the ABC – there was very little real debate or seemingly much business conducted that didn't consist of either rubber-stamping management decisions or complaining about programs they didn't like.

Now - the current government isn't the first to stack the board. Labor governments have been equally guilty over the years. What has changed though is the calibre of those appointees. Governments have always appointed like-minded people but this government is the first to appoint people whose main qualification seems to be that they dislike the ABC, believe it to be biased and in need of change.

The recent appointment of people like Janet Albrechtsen, Ron Brunton and Keith Windschuttle – the so called culture warriors - really marks a new low in the government's campaign to undermine the independence of the ABC.

I am pleased to note the Oppositions commitment to putting in place an independent process for determining ABC board appointments if it comes to power. It will be up to us all to keep them to their word if they are elected.

There are two other matters of concern I want to mention. I won't go into any great detail as I know the Friends keep you well informed but I will just say a short word about Commercialisation and Casualisation.

As you will know, the ABC act specifically prohibits advertising or sponsorship on TV and Radio. The problem is however, that there is a loophole that allows advertising on-line. I call it a loophole as the only reason it is there is because this technology did not exist when the laws were drawn up. No-one can doubt that if it had, it would have been covered by the prohibition as well. On-line advertising may not break the letter but it is certainly breaking the spirit of the ABC Act.

And it is happening now. The ABC owns and runs a Countdown website that has ads.

The trouble is that the very same reasons that make advertising a corrupting influence on the more traditional channels apply equally on-line. Commercial influences would change the ABC's programming, pushing it more towards mass-market products, which are already delivered by commercial broadcasters. Most importantly of all, commercial advertising would threaten the ABC's editorial independence.

More and more people are accessing the ABC through the ABC website, through podcasts (where you download programs to play on your personal audio player) and through Video on demand (where you can watch Television programs whenever you wish).

If you aren't a big user of the internet yourself this might seem unimportant or a bit of a niche market. In fact, it is not impossible that in the future these technologies will become the main method that people use to access the ABC. To give you some feel for the numbers, close to 2 million! podcasts are downloaded each month from the ABC with the top shows being *Life Matters* and *Late Night Live*. And it is growing rapidly.

There are a number of Coalition politicians who have floated the idea of allowing advertising on the ABC generally. The prime minister has made no commitment but has tended to talk down the possibility. Labor has specifically committed to ensure that the current ban on ABC advertising and sponsorship remains in place. Even this however does not go far enough as it says nothing about protecting those areas that are currently unprotected.

The Managing Director –Mark Scott – refuses to rule out further advertising on the ABC's websites in the future. The staff view is that any form of advertising on any of the ABC's distribution channels must be opposed, and the Friends have an important role to play in continuing to raise the public awareness of this issue.

Finally I want to mention the creeping casualisation we are seeing at the ABC.

The ABC has always been served well by its full-time, ongoing staff. People who have loyalty to the organisation and care about the ethos of public broadcasting. People who know their audiences, are prepared to take risks and to challenge audiences to broaden their minds and critically examine a range of issues. People who have made innovative and ground-breaking programs across a number of genres.

These people are disappearing. The average age of TV employees here in Tasmania is over 50! And many will be leaving over the next few years. At the same time, staff are increasingly being employed casually or for what is called 'run of show' (that is only for the period of yearly production for a particular show). Often these people will be put off over the end of year production break and re-employed on 'run of show' again the following year.

Management are claiming that TV jobs cannot be filled on-going because they don't know if the TV programs will be continued or 're-commissioned' next year. This has never seemed to be a barrier in the past. And according to this logic, there is not one program on the TV schedule – including News - that could employ ongoing staff because every program is subject to the annual re-commissioning process.

Nationally, in the entire ABC the last 3 ½ years, out of all the producers jobs advertised, only 2 have been advertised as on-going!

This increasing casualisation of ABC staff is due to 2 factors. One is certainly financial. The ABC is still struggling to continue with the reduced funding it has suffered under the current government.

However the other reason is perhaps more significant. Since the time of the disastrous managing director Jonathan Shier, a number of commercially orientated managers have been brought into the organisation. There is now a significant view within the ABC that the majority of ABC programming should be outsourced to the commercial industry. This is assisted by the government (lobbied heavily by the independent production sector) giving money to the ABC to be used solely for purchasing programs externally.

Early this year, Director of Television – Kim Dalton – told a Screen Producers Association seminar that, and I quote: “in the longer term, outside of its weekly magazine or program strands, ABC TV will move out of internal factual and documentary production. Going into the future, one-off or short run series documentary or factual production will only be made in partnership with the independent sector.”

Although Managing Director, Mark Scott has been a bit more circumspect, we all need to remain vigilant. There will always be a place for purchased or jointly produced programs, but without a strong internal production component, the ABC is in danger of ending up as just a transmission service for bought in programs.

I didn't want this address to you to finish on a negative note. The truth is that for all the difficulties it has faced - and is still facing - the ABC is still a wonderful organisation and it is a great privilege to work there. I have been a staff representative for more than 15 years so I have gone through a lot of issues and a lot of campaigns with the staff.

The thing I love about it is that the staff have always shown that they have a very genuine concern for the organisation. Not just for the impact it might have on their working lives but also because they have a real commitment to public broadcasting. For caring about their audiences and being determined to treat them not as consumers but as citizens. For producing high quality, entertaining and worthwhile programs.

We have fought for many issues over the years – and by we I mean the staff and the public led by the Friends of the ABC. We have won some and we have lost some. I don't know how some of the current issues are going to progress.

What I do know however is that if people are meeting again in another 75 years to celebrate an ABC they care about – it won't be because of governments – it won't be because of board members – it won't be because of managers – it won't even be because of the staff.

It will be because people like you are prepared to fight to keep an ABC we can all be proud of and that Australia both needs and deserves.

Nigel Whitehead
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