

News+Views

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The slashing of international broadcasting.



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Be alert and alarmed

Independent public broadcasting is under threat.

Australia's national broadcaster is being cut and reshaped by the Liberal-National Coalition Government. Prime Minister Abbott's promise of "no cuts to the ABC" has been broken. The public broadcaster's political and commercial independence is in danger.

The Abbott Government has axed Australia Network, the international television service provided by the ABC. Together with a cut of about \$9 million per annum to the ABC's operational funding, the loss of Australia Network has sliced \$120 million from the ABC's budget over the next four years.

Ominously, the May Federal Budget papers refer to the "efficiency saving" cut to the ABC's operational funds as a "down payment" on the results of the Government's efficiency study of the ABC and SBS which has been underway.

The Government appears not to accept that the public broadcaster has a governing board that is responsible for its management. Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull established an efficiency review to influence the broadcaster's operations.

His appointment of a former finance head of a commercial broadcasting outlet – Peter Lewis, former Seven West Media chief financial officer – to suggest ways the ABC's expenditure could be cut was a strong indicator that the review's proposals would be for the ABC to operate in a more commercial manner.

Mr Turnbull's claim that his study would identify savings that would have no impact on programming is clearly absurd.

The secret review has now concluded. Leaks reported in the media include proposals to:

CHARGE FEES for iView, the ABC's immensely popular catch-up online television service

DUMP digital radio channels

SELL ABC studios, and cut and centralise in Sydney what is left of internal TV production

MERGE some ABC and SBS operations

INCREASE advertising on SBS



Mr Lewis also recommends a process for further cuts and government influence over the ABC – the issuing of a regular Ministerial Statement of Expectation to the ABC and SBS boards that would focus on financial and administrative

matters – to which the ABC/SBS would have to respond, detailing how they are managing their resources and will seek further savings.

Under the pressure of a minister who decided before the review had barely begun that huge savings in ABC expenditure had to be delivered, the ABC Board is now considering the review's proposals.

The very essence of the ABC is its independence. The ABC Board must defend the national broadcaster's independence. It must reject the Government's attempts to influence the ABC's operations.

ABC Friends has called for full details of the cost-cutting review to be made public. Australians are entitled to know what is being considered for their national public broadcaster, why it is being proposed, and to have their say.



Illustration: Tony Sowersby

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Cutting Australia off from the world

The World (screened domestically on the ABC's News 24 channel and overseas) is one program that will suffer from the loss of Australia Network funding. Highly respected journalists Zoe Daniel and Jim Middleton have been axed from the program and are reported to be facing redundancy.



The ABC Act hasn't been changed. The ABC is still required to transmit news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural programs "to countries outside Australia" in order to "encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs" and "enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs."

By simply defunding Australia Network to shut it down the Government has circumvented the scrutiny of the Senate on a matter of significant national importance.

It's unbelievable that any government with the long-term interests of the nation at heart would scale back international broadcasting in its own region.

Other governments are vying for the influence that international broadcasting affords. China, for example, is increasing its broadcasting investment in the Pacific.

The axing of Australia Network appears to be an effort to curry favour with Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corp media outlets campaigned for the Coalition in the last election.

News Corp-backed Sky News has lobbied relentlessly for Australia's international television service to be handed over to it, along with public funds. However, the Government cannot proceed to the next step of funding Sky News to provide the service without the support of the Senate.

International broadcasting is of such strategic importance that no government in the world, except Australia, has sought to outsource its service.

And after a botched tender process in which the Murdoch media was securing and reporting leaks that favoured Sky News, the last Labor government legislated for Australia's national public broadcaster to remain the provider of Commonwealth-funded international broadcasting.

We must continue to remind the Government of the foolishness of its decision to cut international broadcasting and urge that it be reversed. And we must stop Australia's national interests from being handed over to the Murdoch dynasty.



We are often unaware of the importance of the ABC's international services to countries in our region and to Australians working or travelling overseas.

Nic Maclellan, a correspondent for *Islands Business* magazine, reported comments of Miranda, a member of Futuna Island's community disaster committee:

"We rely a lot on Radio Australia when there's a cyclone coming. We have no telephone on this side of the island and we often can't hear Radio Vanuatu."

Director of the Myer Melanesia Program at the Lowy Institute, Jenny Hayward Jones, has written that domestic news broadcasters across the Pacific are shrinking and in some cases subject to political control.

Some Pacific island populations rely on Radio Australia to report about not only international news but events in their own country.

International broadcasting is a relatively cheap means to increase awareness of our nation and build positive relations with people in other countries, with all the flow-on affects that has for trade and diplomacy. It reaches beyond political leaders and diplomats – to the people of other countries.

The ABC has secured Australia's broadcasting presence in our region by providing trusted programming and a reliable service over many years – commencing with Radio Australia in 1939, and expanding to television and online.

An important part of the service has been original content produced by ABC staff who have extensive knowledge and contacts, and a deep cultural understanding of their part of the region.

Tragically, the outstanding work of ABC International and past public expenditure is set to be squandered.

Unable to hand Australia Network (AN) to Murdoch/News Corp-backed Sky News for now, the Government has simply shut down Australia's international television service provided by the ABC and stopped its funding.

Key functions of Australia Network and Radio Australia have been merged in recent years. With the ABC's annual budget for international broadcasting now reduced by 60 percent (from \$35 to \$15 million) and with about 80 jobs to be axed, Radio Australia services are also being cut.

Radio Australia programs *Asia Pacific*, *Asia Review*, and *Mornings* will be scrapped, leaving no dedicated Asian program. There will be less original non-English programming. Programs like the flagship *Pacific Beat* will continue, but without specialist Pacific reporters. Instead, more of its content will be sourced from the domestic ABC.

Correspondents that will disappear from the ABC's Asia Pacific News Centre, which serviced Australia Network and Radio Australia, include Delhi, Jakarta and Beijing.

Their demise will affect local audiences too. The loss of experienced Pacific correspondent Sean Dorney will impact on the breadth and depth of the reports that Australia gets about important happenings in our region.

Ensure that ALL OPPOSITION SENATORS know you want them to VOTE AGAINST any attempt to change legislation to allow Australian international broadcasting TO BE OUTSOURCED.

ABC Friends

Friends in Parliament

Over 50 people attended the launch of a new Parliamentary Friends of the ABC group in May.

The focus of the group, which has support from politicians across different parties, is to support the ABC to deliver its charter objectives. While there is no formal link between ABC Friends and the new Parliamentary group, we are hopeful the two bodies will exchange ideas and information to advance the ABC.

Co-chairs of Parliamentary Friends of the ABC – Melissa Parke MP (Labor) and Craig Laundy MP (Liberal)



Stacking ahead?



The Government could save itself the trouble of interfering in the ABC by merging the roles of ABC chairman and communications minister. There are politicians more alive than this one with the outlook for the job.

Are we retuning to the bad old days when the Howard Government sought to impose its political and commercial agenda on the ABC through appointments it made to the ABC Board?

Recently, Janet Albrechtsen and Neil Brown, two strong critics of the ABC, were appointed to the panel of four that recommends to the Government appointments to the ABC Board.

Dr Albrechtsen, a columnist with *The Australian* newspaper who was previously a Howard government appointee to the ABC Board, is well known for her antagonism to the ABC. In a recent media interview, Mr Brown, a former deputy Liberal Party leader under John Howard, said of the ABC, "I think it should be sold".

The nomination panel had been introduced by the former Labour government to depoliticise the process of appointments to the ABC Board and assess applicants on merit. It is an approach used in Britain for government appointments to public boards, and had been long recommended by Friends of the ABC.

While Dr Albrechtsen and Mr Brown were appointed by the secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Ian Watt, it is widely believed their appointments would not have occurred without government influence.

"I can't believe PM&C would make this decision. It looks too political for the public service to put these names forward," was the reported response of Meredith Edwards, a former deputy secretary of Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Equally as worrying are the comments of Communications Minister Turnbull, whose responsibility it is to make ordinary Board appointments. In an interview on ABC radio at the time of the Albrechtsen-Brown appointments, he revealed a strong interest in having a board comprising members with corporate and business experience:

"I just want to say that the critical thing for members of the boards of either of those large broadcasting businesses - and they are businesses . . . the critical thing is that the people who go on these boards have corporate and business and management experience".

One position on the ABC Board is presently vacant. Two further appointments will be made next year.

As they say, watch this space.

The way it was

Pete Smith: ABC 1957-1964, GTV9 1964 -

What talent might no longer be discovered? Veteran broadcaster Pete Smith, who went on to work with Graham Kennedy at IMT, recalls an ABC when a messenger boy could become a presenter and evening presenters wore suits – on radio!

As a child in the late forties and early fifties the radio was an all important part of leisure time in the family home.

In the evening the family would listen to the radio – Mum knitting, Dad reading the paper, and I would be on the floor looking up at the mantle radio. Looking up and WATCHING the radio.

In the mid-fifties, when I began at the ABC as a messenger boy, departments of the ABC were spread around Melbourne.

The Sporting department was under the control of Ken Dakin. I recall one of the sports trainees during that time was a young Bill Hunter who went on to star in many successful Australian movies.

The major role of the messenger boy was to be driven in a Commonwealth car around the various ABC buildings, dropping off and picking up mail. I was also tasked with the job of destroying transcription recordings which contained such wonderful radio shows as *The Goon Show*. (Destruction had to take place once the rights lapsed).

I went on to become an announcer, joining a wonderful group of voices including Keith Glover, John Royle, Howard Baker, Ian Neil, John Sloan, Norman Blee & Graeme Lyndon.

ABC evening shift announcers were required to wear dinner suits in the years before I joined them. The Commission was run very much along the lines of the BBC.

A complement of some twenty announcers was required to work not only on the home service (Melbourne metropolitan) but also on the regional stations, on news reading duties and on Radio Australia's 24 hour short-wave service.

Very few general announcers conducted their own programs under their own name. Those who gained personality status included Russ Tyson who conducted the Breakfast session and the *Hospital Half Hour* every morning from Brisbane.

Eric Child conducted jazz programs from Sydney, as did Kym Bonython in Adelaide.

In my late teens I was given the job of conducting the *ABC Hit Parade* and hosting *The Teenage Show* with local artists performing live with the ABC Melbourne Dance Band. The idea of a radio station, even a television station, having their own orchestra on the staff seems unbelievable today.

The programs I hosted were broadcast on the national ABC network and on Radio Australia throughout the British Isles, North America and Asia. There were listeners in California who had special aerials mounted on the roof of their homes to receive the short-wave signal.



When television began John Royle became the main newsreader on ABV2, supported by Barry McQueen. Gaps between programs were covered by hostesses Corinne Kirby and Jocelyn Terry delivering community service announcements, and I filled in. In those black and white TV days they even used loop films of water wheels, waterfalls and flying birds to keep the viewers amused until the designated start time.

I compered live variety programs like *Fancy Free*, supported by local artists of the day and again featuring our own ABC Dance Band under the baton of Frank Thorn. In Sydney the dance band was conducted by Jim Gussey and in the forties and fifties they recorded many a hit recording.

The *ABC Hit Parade* was such a popular radio program that I was asked to do the same thing on television. I remember saying "I'm happy to sit and introduce the records on camera, but what will we show on the screen while the hits are playing?"

"You'll be doing the show as 'Sports View Hit Parade' on Saturday afternoons and we will provide race and sporting results on a credit crawl as you play each record.

As I recall the race results were typed on to lavatory paper, being the most absorbent material that wouldn't shine back into the camera lens. The typist's skill was in typing all the results but missing the perforations!

Soon after, I began using a series of cut-out photos of the stars singing the songs; glued down onto cards which I literally "flipped" in front of the camera. (Remember this was long before the era of video clips.) Occasionally if someone like Elvis Presley was in the Top Ten the film company would provide the relevant song from the movie. The impact of having a film clip was enormous!

Without realising it, we had created the granddaddy of *Countdown*.

Some twenty five years later I was invited by the D Generation to return to Ripponlea Studio 300 where it all started to perform 'Dude Looks Like A Lady' on the very popular *Late Show*.

I remember my time at the ABC with great affection and suggest that radio in its heyday was bigger than television ever was. A true theatre of the mind where your imagination could take you to the ends of the earth and beyond.

This is an edited extract of Pete Smith's full article which is at www.abcfriends.org.au



What may become of your favourite ABC services and programs if attacks on our ABC continue

ABC Friends (Vic) Vice-president, David Risstrom, in his address to Melbourne's 'Fair Australia' rally:

Four Corners	Two Corners
7.30	3.65
Shaun Micallef's Mad as Hell	Shorn Shaun in Happy as Heaven
Foreign Correspondent	Council News
Classic ABC	Easy Listening ABC
ABC Local Radio	Ultimo Radio
At the Movies	Mega-plex Promotions
Lateline	The Test Pattern
Media Watch	Rupert's Corner
Q&A	Q and I am unable to answer as this is an operation matter
iView catchup	Please call Foxtel



Make a real fashion statement!

\$20 plus postage. Purchase your cotton t-shirt at www.ilovetheabc.bigcartel.com

T-shirts come in sizes for children and men, and fitted sizes for women. All profits go to ABC Friends.

Spread the word

If you plan to attend an event likely to be frequented by other people who have an interest in the ABC, take some ABC Friends material with you. Postcards that call on the Government to uphold the ABC's independence and honour its pre-election promise of "no cuts to the ABC" can be obtained from ABC Friends in your state.

ABC Friends on the job

'Australians Baking Cakes for the ABC' launch outside Minister Turnbull's office, The Gardeners Corner Store, Darebin public meeting, Bust the Budget Lismore rally, GetUp-ABC Friends rally, Bust the Budget Melbourne rally.



ABC Friends

ABC Friends is a national campaign. It comprises ABC Friends and Friends of the ABC organisations across Australia.

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