



ABC Managing Director David Anderson opening statement to Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, 21 October 2020.

Thank you Chair.

I'd like to make some brief opening remarks about the ABC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the release of our Five-Year Plan and the vital role of the nation's public broadcaster during this year of tremendous upheaval.

This is my first appearance before the committee since early March, eight months ago.

On behalf of the ABC, I want to acknowledge the impact of this pandemic on all Australians. Never in our lifetimes have we seen our borders closed and experienced such disruption of our lives. It's been a time of great stress and hardship for many families and businesses, and hundreds of loved ones have been lost.

As the national broadcaster, the ABC has risen to the challenge and done what our audiences expect of us and provided what they need from us. As with the bushfires last summer, we have gone beyond those expectations.

We've shared the stories of the pandemic, from individuals and communities. This includes stories of courage, resilience, determination and optimism as the nation looks to recover.

Our journalists have sought answers and provide the vital content and analysis that people turn to us for daily. We'll continue to ask questions and demand answers, without fear or favour on their behalf.

We've been a vital provider of information and education, especially for our young people when face-to-face schooling was suspended.

In these difficult times we've also been a much-needed source of entertainment.

We've connected communities in an unprecedented way to help Australians come together virtually, if not in person.

The last time I addressed the Committee I updated you on our progress with the ABC's Five-Year Plan, our strategy for the period 2020 to 2025. We released the Plan in June, mapping our transition to a public broadcaster of the future: relevant, reliable, valuable and accessible to all Australians in the ever-changing technological landscape.

The ABC has always held a trusted relationship with Australians, and for this tradition of trust to continue we must adapt for the future, while continuing to tell unique Australian stories. And we must evolve to ensure we reflect all Australians everywhere, the community in which they live, and the contribution they make.

The ABC Five-Year Plan announcement has not been without a significant degree of pain for the ABC. In meeting the pause on indexation for the remainder of this triennium funding period, in addition to previous budget cuts, we've made difficult decisions that have affected both staff and services.

We are still in the process of farewelling 229 colleagues, employees from across all divisions and teams who have made significant contributions. Some have been names instantly recognisable to our audiences, others from support teams who have served with equal dedication and commitment.

They leave with our heartfelt thanks and best wishes for the future. As so many Australian businesses have experienced in 2020, losing good people is never welcome or easy.

The last Federal Budget maintained the ABC's operation funding level until 2022, albeit with the indexation pause that will require ongoing savings measures. We've noted in our response that the forward years show a declining budget beyond 2021-22, due to the expiry of the enhanced newsgathering initiative.

This initiative has been part of our budget since 2013 and has been renewed twice. By the end of this triennium it will have been in place for nine years.

The funding has enabled us to deliver more tailored and local news to communities and to bring news from across the country to a national

audience. It has meant more jobs in our local and regional newsgathering capacity and provides vital services valued by the community, including specialist work done by our national reporting teams.

Prior to the expiry of the initiative we will continue to make the case for this funding to be permanently incorporated into the ABC's operating funding base.

The founding idea of the ABC as a public broadcaster was to service Australian audiences with news, entertainment, information and education and to reflect the breadth of our nation, regardless of the tyranny of distance.

For almost 90 years this idea has been embraced as the foundation of tradition and trust with Australians everywhere. A broadcaster with something of value for everyone.

This doesn't mean we can always please everyone. Our critics relentlessly try to make us part of a cultural debate most Australians do not find relevant or helpful. The ABC is bigger than this debate. And yet public broadcasters around the world face a similar challenge, an assault on their very existence by commercial enterprises that claim that such public services are no longer necessary.

The vast majority of Australians disagree. 2020 has shown us they want, and expect, a public broadcaster that will meet their critical needs across news, entertainment, information and education – just as the ABC Charter demands.

Providing this service to the highest levels of our abilities is exactly what we intend to keep doing.

In this year of uncertainty Australians have turned to a voice they can trust – the ABC.

We have seen major shifts in the consumption of media during the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by more people at home with a greater need for those services.

In this environment, the ABC has been more important than ever:

- ABC TV and iview have both grown reach, with live ABC News streaming key to this.

- ABC News digital has reached new heights: number one across all demographics, with engagement up 80% compared to 2019.
- The ABC NEWS website was Australia's top digital news site in September for the ninth consecutive month.
- In the latest radio ratings survey, ABC radio achieved its highest reach since 2004.
- 1.6m Average Monthly Users have visited ABC Kids on iView - across all websites and apps, an increase of 36% year-on-year. *Bluey* remains the number one kids' program with 2.5m VPM Average Audience.
- ABC Kids reaches 62% of 0-4s weekly.

We've been here for Australian audiences and we'll continue to be.

There is one final matter I would like to address.

Last week I was notified by the Australian Federal Police Commissioner that the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions will not proceed with any action against our journalist Dan Oakes over his reporting of allegations about Australian soldiers committing war crimes in Afghanistan.

This matter should have never gone so far. It is more than three years since the ABC published *The Afghan Files* and over a year since the AFP raided our Ultimo building, hunting for information on the confidential sources for that reporting.

In that time, great resources and efforts have been wasted pursuing the confidential source of stories that were accurate and clearly in the public interest. As we have maintained all through this saga, Australians deserve better of their democracy. They deserve legislation that offers proper protection of journalists, their sources and the public's right to know.

I would now be very pleased to answer any questions you have.