

**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS
INQUIRY INTO RECENT ABC PROGRAMMING DECISIONS
SUBMISSION FROM BOBBIE MACKLEY**

I am a retired member of ABC staff who was based at the Perth branch from 1980 until late 2010. For the last 20 years until I left I was a leading elected (& voluntary) staff representative for CPSU, holding office at both local and national levels. This background gives me a broad and knowledgeable perspective on the issues currently affecting the ABC in Perth, the other smaller ABC state centres, and nationally.

The current debate has mainly revolved about the outsourcing of ABC television production, the ABC's commitment to Arts programming, and the decommissioning of various internally produced programs, some of which are or were made in the smaller state branches of the ABC. There has been little, if any, comment that I have seen on the broader effects of outsourcing on the state branches, or on the ability of the ABC, as a national organisation, to reflect all parts of Australia to a national audience. These issues are the focus of my submission.

I'd like to start with a little history to provide some context. Until the mid-1980s ABC Perth had a Children's & Education Unit that produced shows such as *Let's Join In* for a national audience, and *Here In the West* for a local audience. These series ran for many years and were part of the ABC's then commitment to educational programming for children. There was a TV Executive Producer based in the branch and a TV Production Unit staffed by committed, talented and skilled people making a variety of programs. There was also a busy scenic construction workshop which enabled the branch to build its own sets. As an example, in 1985 the Unit produced a delightful program, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, based on an Australian version of the traditional Christmas carol (written and published in print form in Perth). The cast of the program were students from the WA Academy of Performing Arts; costumes were designed and made by students from the Perth Technical College; it had a score arranged by Andrew Bolt and was narrated by Dave Warner. This program was repeated nationally at Christmas time over several years and was popular with a young audience and their parents. To me, a production such as this, for a national audience while providing a unique experience and opportunity to local talent, is part of what a truly national public sector broadcaster should be about.

It has, however, always been a battle to get local production into the national schedules, and successful shows had a habit of relocating east (*Rock Arena* is an example). For some years the position of WA Executive Producer was left unfilled, and when an appointment was eventually made, it had a much narrower brief. However, in the last dozen years or so, many nationally-screened programs and series were produced in Perth. A list of Perth-produced programs 1999-2011 is at Appendix 1, but I'd like to highlight two programs produced since 2005 in the new custom-built ABC premises in East Perth.

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Can We Help? began life in 2006 as a co-production, but after the first year the license was purchased by the ABC and it was made entirely in-house until its de-commissioning in June this year. Filling a 30 minute slot at 6:30 on a weeknight, it had high audience outreach and interaction, was educative and provided real help to individuals. It was made by a team of mostly young researchers and skilled production staff, utilising the large TV studio (though for some reason the actual filming was moved east in the last year or two of its run), and pre- and post-production facilities such as the graphics suite and editing booths. It would be interesting to know the production costs of this program compared to a similar program made outside the ABC, or indeed prior to its purchase by the ABC. Its webpages can still be accessed here: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/canwehelp/>

Rollercoaster Hostings deserves a special mention in the context of this Inquiry. This program, with a target audience of older primary school-aged children, consisted of short segments that screened between longer programs, and had an educational and informative basis whilst being lots of fun. It had an interactive on-line presence maintained by the production team (and still accessible via <http://www.abc.net.au/abc3/rollercoaster/>) and had a very talented and popular young host with a special ability to connect with children. The small production team, about half-a-dozen staff some of whom were also rostered on other tasks such as News crewing, were extremely creative, enthusiastic and committed. The program ran from 2005 till January 2010 and was initially filmed in a corner of the TV News studio in the new building until a new set, constructed in the east and shipped over, was installed in the large (& under-utilised) TV studio, Studio 61. The show frequently filmed segments outside, visiting schools and other places of interest. Though the reasons for its de-commissioning are not really known to me, I do know that at one point, towards the end of its run, an attempt was made to move it east. The mostly young people who worked on this show were devastated when it was de-commissioned. There was no other work of a comparable level of skill and creativity available to them then or since. I understand that four of these people have recently been offered redundancies (these redundancies are additional to the recently announced round that lists 7 positions). Incidentally, the set itself, and the frequent presence of the popular and talented host, was a genuine treat for visiting school children on tours of the ABC building.

Both these shows are now gone and this year the TV Production Unit has all but disappeared as staff have walked out the door at the end of their contracts or, for on-going staff, with redundancies. In relation to contract staff, it has been the policy for some years to employ producers and researchers on a contract basis only, usually for what is known in the wider industry as 'run-of-show' (a not very satisfactory arrangement for individuals who, for example, might like to try for a home loan). Some of these mostly young staff would have dearly loved to receive the commitment of the ABC to them as demonstrated by on-going employment. One of the great strengths of the ABC has always been the commitment,

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dedication, hard work and passion of its staff, plus the somewhat under-valued advantages of 'corporate memory', for whom working at the ABC has always been much, much more than "just a job". ABC staff have always been acutely aware of their responsibilities as employees of an iconic, taxpayer-funded organisation. Whilst ABC Management over the last few years has been promoting a 'Code of Values' to staff, including 'Respect' and 'Collegiality', in my opinion (which I have reason to believe is widely shared) there has been little demonstration of these qualities towards staff by senior management (I except local management in Perth from this comment, and of course I cannot speak with any authority about the other states in this respect).

I would also respectfully like to request that the Inquiry seeks details of an outside production slated for screening later this year called 'Who's Been Sleeping In My House?' The idea for this program was originally pitched to the ABC by an employee. It was later commissioned from an external independent production company. There were problems with the production and I understand, whilst not knowing the details, that ABC staff have since been heavily involved in preparing the series for transmission.

The ABC branch in Perth has been badly hit on various fronts, not least of which is the increasing centralisation of influence and decision-making in the east. In relation to skills, there is no longer a Graphics department, which once employed up to three people plus casuals, this function having been moved to Melbourne a year or two ago. Desk-top editing by journalists and reporters has reduced the need for specialist editors and left several edit suites in the newsroom dark. I am not in a position to judge any resultant decrease in the quality of News output. It stands to reason, though, that the replacement of highly skilled editors who worked side-by-side with journalists, by those same journalists struggling on their own with many competing priorities and newly-acquired skills is likely to affect quality adversely. With the end of in-house TV production and only limited and by no means guaranteed staff participation in co-productions, a whole swathe of skilled and experienced staff are no longer required. An end to coverage of the WA Football League will see most of the remaining skilled TV staff depart. We will have a beautiful, taxpayer-funded building with many of its "state of the art" facilities either unused, or used by staff employed outside the ABC.

One wonders just who will be left to crew next year's WA ANZAC Day March & Service, and using what facilities. Could we see freelancers with limited experience working with people they have never, or rarely, worked with before and operating out of an unfamiliar OB van, perhaps what was once the ABC's own van hired back at huge expense. Perhaps the Inquiry could find out the costs involved in such an exercise?

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Beyond television, there are other areas in which the Perth branch has been diminished. Positions in the national radio unit, Radio National and ClassicFM, in Perth have decreased from 13 in 1997 to less than 8 FTE today. All but one of these positions has been lost through natural attrition, but the resulting cost savings have been used to employ staff in Sydney and Melbourne rather than in Perth. A current restructure of the Technical Services area will result in the loss of more highly skilled and specialist staff. The introduction of new network-based technology has also seen roles and functions centralised, moving skills, involvement and the 'pointy end' of systems out of the branch. A table showing the decline in staffing numbers in all the state centres over a long period is at Appendix 2. Staff numbers everywhere will be significantly decreased in the 2011 figures due to the decommissioning of programs. They will be even further decreased in 2012 due to further redundancies from production, resources and technical areas.

The Perth branch is not large and the new building is compact. Unlike in some of the larger centres, staff are not segregated by swipecard into their respective areas. There has always been much social and productive creative interaction between staff from Radio and Television and other areas. With the loss of the TV Production Unit, these opportunities are lost.

Whilst senior local management have always done, and continue to do what they can to promote the branch, their empowerment to influence change has decreased over the years with all decisions of any import taken outside the state.

The long-held fear that the Perth branch will be reduced to News, Local Radio and (what is left of) the national radio unit, plus a few support and essential technical staff, is not far from being realised. In relation to Television, the Perth branch will become a relay station for other people's programs. It may end up not much bigger than the ABC's regional station in Bunbury.

In May 2010 Kim Dalton met with Perth staff, at their request, while he was in Perth for discussions with the independent production sector. This was the first and only time the Director of ABC Television had met with a large group of Perth staff. He quite openly and clearly told the 30 or 40 staff present that only program ideas pitched from outside the ABC would be considered for production. In effect, if you have an idea worthy of production by the ABC, you need to resign from the ABC first. The Director of Television admitted to having no knowledge of the skills and experience of TV staff in Western Australia, and it was very obvious that he wasn't interested. When asked why interstate ABC producers often brought their own crews with them to film in WA, instead of utilising WA crews, he said he didn't know anything about it, and again, it was obvious that he couldn't care less. Asked about sport (the *Hopman Cup* having been decommissioned the year before), he said that the ABC would now be concentrating on minority and

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women's sport. One wonders how the cancellation of lawn bowls coverage fits in with this; or, more importantly for Western Australia, how the cancellation of WAFL coverage – not yet announced but very much expected – fits in with this. Ditto for SANFL, TSL & VFL and Qld & NSW Rugby League. It's worth noting that sales of copies of the most recent WAFL Grand Final were in excess of 1,000 generating an income of approximately \$45,000, funds that go back into program making. This revenue will be lost if ABC coverage ceases.

The digital outside broadcast van is often used to cover sporting events such as the AFL for commercial broadcasters with its crew hired out as skilled labour. Whilst I would much rather see staff and resources used to make programs for screening on the ABC, this does at least generate considerable income. I have heard that the WA branch makes the largest contribution of funds of all the state centres through resources hire. By the way, the Hopman Cup is still filmed by ABC crews, but not for screening on the ABC.

Mark Scott has said to staff, and repeated in a speech at the National Press Club on 31st. August 2011, that he sees "...the future of television production at the ABC being a mixed model. Some programs we will make, others we will commission and co-produce, others we will buy. We are looking to develop a plan for our production mix for the next several years." It is obvious to everyone that none of the programs he says "we will make" will be made at the ABC in Western Australia. As things are going, there won't be the skilled staff available in-house to do so.

I should point out that ABC staff are not totally against co-productions. There have been co-productions going back many years. However, in more recent arrangements there seems to be little ABC involvement beyond the use of facilities. Perhaps the Inquiry could request the details of the recent ScreenWest production which has been using ABC Perth's Studio 61 (and on which I understand only one member of ABC staff, a technical producer familiar with the studio, has been engaged).

Mark Scott also said at the NPC: "ABC News 24 has allowed us to showcase more journalism from around the country". While this may be true in some respects, there are actually limited resources located in Western Australia to cover major events here. For example, when, in February this year, 70 houses were destroyed in a massive blaze in the outer suburbs of Perth, News24 continued normal programming. There was no live footage of the fire (which took almost 24 hours to get under control) at all on News24 because the single News Links vehicle at ABC Perth was engaged on another job. The calamity in Perth was covered on News24 by an intermittent crawl on the bottom of the screen.

Mr. Scott's "... vast slate of internal production ..." (his speech to the NPC referred to above) consists mostly of News and Current Affairs programs produced in the eastern states (with the exception of the

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state edition of *ABC News* at 7pm and the weekly 30-minute *7:30 WA*). A few in-house programs remain, but none are slated for Western Australia. By the way, 'Q&A' has broadcast from Western Australia on one occasion only. The programs 'Landline' and 'Australian Story' have no reporter based in Western Australia.

The attitude of Mark Scott & Kim Dalton towards ABC staff demonstrates to my mind that they have no idea of what makes up the bedrock of public broadcasting. They have both, in my opinion, come to the ABC to further their own agendas. ABC Management's pushing of "Values" including "Respect" and "Collegiality" ring hollow to staff from whom these virtues are expected, but to whom they are not shown in return.

And where are the opportunities in television for Western Australian media graduates to gain training and experience at the national broadcaster? A 'gig' at the ABC, whether work experience, as a trainee or on a short-term contract, has always been highly sought-after in the student community. Where are the opportunities for longer-term employment in the West outside of Local Radio?

In a rapidly converging media landscape, what about content? With multiple channels and outlets, where will all the content come from? The ABC has produced valuable content for national and international broadcast over many years. Where are the actual figures that prove the assertions of Mr. Dalton and Mr. Scott that it is cheaper to make programs outside? No breakdown of production costs has been provided to staff. A report by KPMG a few years ago on this very subject was withheld from staff and the union, so we do not know. Mr. Scott said in his aforementioned NPC speech that "The internal production model works best when there is a high volume of production - keeping the studios busy and the staff fully utilised." That is precisely true, and held true in the past also when the studios, facilities and staff *were* fully utilised. I would like to ask where the blame lies for the current under-utilisation which has led to the end of ABC careers for many committed and quality broadcasters and to taxpayer-funded facilities lying idle?

I believe the very essence of the ABC is being destroyed by those who have their own agendas and who have a poor understanding of what makes a truly great national broadcaster which reflects all parts of the nation to the nation.

Bobbie Mackley

Perth, 8th. September 2011

Appendices 1 & 2 follow

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WA TV PRODUCTION 1999:2011

This list has been put together from various sources and while it is not exhaustive gives a good indication of the amount and types of programming produced in WA since 1999.

- 1999 Children's Science: Series: Waterworks (4 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series: Radio Pictures (5 Eps, WA only)
 Factual: Series: Consuming Passions (40 short Eps, national)
- 1999/2000 Snapshot (200 x 5mins per year)
- 2000 Arts: Angels in the Architecture (one-off)
 Arts: Terrace Proms (one-off)
 Arts: The Planet (6 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series: Consuming Passions (40 short Eps, national)
- 2000/2001 Factual: Series: Radio Pictures (10 Eps, national)
 Women's National Basketball League, national
- 2001 Sport: Davis Cup 1st. Round (national)
 Arts: Terrace Proms (one-off)
 Arts: Dennis Cleveland Opera (one-off, national)
 Arts: Rolf Harris Centenary Concert (one-off, national)
 Children's Science: Series: Atoms of Fire (7 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series: Consuming Passions (40 short Eps, national)
- 2002 Factual: Series: Outback Upfront – co-pro with ScreenWest & FTI (national)
 Children's Science: Series: Atoms Alive (8 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series: Radio Pictures Shorts (cut-down programs used as fillers, national)
 Factual: Series: Police Training Academy (4 Eps, screened 2003, national)
 Factual: Series: Consuming Passions (40 short Eps, national)
- 2003 Arts: Festival of Perth (one-off)
 Factual: Series: Outback Upfront – co-pro with ScreenWest & FTI (national)
 Factual: Series: People Dimensions (40 eps, national)
 Children's Science: Series: Our Earth (7 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series George Negus Tonight (40 Eps, national)
- 2004 Drama: Series: Shark Net (outside production, national)
 Factual: Series: Reality Bites - Children's Ward
 Factual: George Negus Tonight (40 Eps, national)
- 2005 Factual: Series: How The Quest Was Won (36 Eps, national)
 Children's: Series: Rollercoaster Hosting (multiple shorts for ABC3, national)
 Doco: Boys Don't Dance (one-off, national)
- 2006 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (28 Eps, national)
 Factual: Series: The Pet Show (37 Eps, national)
 Children's: Series: Rollercoaster Hosting (290 eps, national)

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- 2007 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (40 x 30min Eps)
 News: Series: Australian Story – Beyond Reasonable Doubt (3 parts)
 Children’s: Series: Rollercoaster Hosting (290 eps, national)
- 2008 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (40 x 30min Eps)
 Children’s: Series: Rollercoaster (290 eps, national)
- 2009 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (40 x 30min Eps)
 Children’s: Series: Rollercoaster (multiple shorts for ABC3, final screening Jan 2010)
- 2010 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (41 x 30min Eps)
- 2011 Factual: Series: Can We Help? (20 x 30min Eps, final series)
 News: Series: Australian Story - Mr Quigley’s Quandary (2 parts)
 News: Series: Australian Story - Desperate Remedies (2 parts)
 Compass: Rebuilding Bunbury Cathedral

PLUS:

WA ANZAC Day March & Service: coverage every year on ABC TV in WA

WAFL: weekly coverage during the season since 1990 for WA urban and regional viewers

Hopman Cup: since inception until 2009, national

Segments into Gardening Australia, Arts programs, Compass

Young Performers Awards – WA heats

Appendix 2 overpage

APPENDIX 2

STAFFING PERCENTAGES BY LOCATION 1986-2010

Percentage of total staff:-

Location	1985/6	1994/5	2000/01	2004	2006	2008	2009	2010
NSW	43.5	49	52.1	47.26	46.9	47.5	47.6	48.7
VIC	21.1	19	16.4	17.61	17.6	17.4	18.3	18.0
QLD	8.7	8	8.2	8.79	9.0	8.8	8.5	8.5
SA	8.6	8	6.8	8.29	8.3	8.0	7.8	7.7
WA	7.8	7	5.8	6.47	6.3	6.1	6.1	5.9
TAS	6.9	5	4.7	4.39	4.6	4.5	4.2	3.9
ACT	1.5	2	2.6	3.69	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.8
NT	0.9	2	2.8	2.95	2.9	3.2	2.9	2.8
O/SEAS	0.9	N/A	0.6	0.54	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7
TOTAL	99.9	100	100	99.99	100.01	100	100	100

Statistics sourced from ABC Annual Reports to Parliament 1985/6, 1994/5, 2000/01, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2009 & 2010