

Submission on The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I welcome this opportunity to comment on The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity within the terms of reference as set out by the Environment and Communications References Committee.

Regional diversity and national identity will be diminished with the loss of the ABC Tasmanian Production Unit. Programs of high quality reflecting and representing regional diversity have been produced in Tasmania and include Auction Room, the extremely popular "Collectors" and "Gardening Australia" when it was hosted by Peter Cundall. These Tasmanian programs enabled national viewers to enjoy and appreciate the state's distinctive heritage and culture. The Tasmanian bushfires were best reported by local journalists who have a personal understanding of the state; its people and conditions. The decision to cut ABC production in Hobart has met with opposition from 12 Federal Senators and the Premier, Lara Giddings who is unable to match funding from the State budget for Screen Tasmania to offset ABC cuts as requested by the ABC's Managing Director (ABC, 2012)¹.

Similarly, Western Australia also has limited ABC production with the cessation of "Can We Help?" enjoyed by viewers over six years. The decline, according to Cassellas (2012), has been evident since 1985 when WA had a low but reasonable 7.8 per cent of ABC's staff compared with just 5.4 per cent in 2012². Now the WA studio is mainly unused or hired out to companies like Screen West. By comparison, NSW had 49.2 per cent of the ABC's staff last year. In spite of the small ABC production unit, Western Australia sets a high standard with 7.30 Stateline. The program host, Andrew O'Connor, conducts intelligent and courteous interviews in contrast to the aggressive gotcha style displayed by prominent Sydney hosts which leave viewers with little information and guarded responses from interviewees. It is hoped that 7.30 Stateline will continue as an example of a high-quality state production.

Loss of skills and state production along with Scott's ambition for ABC News 24 and news and current affairs across all platforms at all times of the day has implications for states such as Perth and Hobart. Opportunities for those seeking careers as journalists will be reduced in these states as jobs become centred in Melbourne and Sydney. For many viewers ABC

¹¹ ABC News (2012), Premier rules out state funding deal accessed from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-11-21/senators-unite-against-abc-cuts/4383498?section=tas>

² Pam Cassellas (2012) "Aunty's fare ignores WA tastes" The West Australian.

24 with its new breed of commercialised recruits is not high quality news and current affairs as contended by Scott (2012)³ but is, rather, recycled news that is rotated every couple of hours. This stops the ABC from doing other worthwhile things and it should be reined in.

ABC's inability to reflect national identity is also evident in current ABC programming. Since Q&A started in 2008 it has only been hosted twice in WA and has an overwhelming preponderance of guests from Sydney and a very low proportion from Western Australia, Queensland and regional centres (IA, 2012). To contribute on Twitter, viewers must watch it on News 24 two or three hours beforehand. The 2012 Radio National (RN) schedule also means that Western Australian listeners are deprived of the excellent specialist programs such as the Health, Law and Media Reports which are now broadcast at inconvenient times to make way for the extension of Breakfast with Fran Kelly. In addition, RN listeners in WA miss the round up of the day's events on PM at 5pm now replaced by "Drive" with Waleed Aly.

While jobs are being cut in smaller states, some with high unemployment, there is an eagerness by the ABC's MD to engage News Ltd's Sydney based employees. These include Hildebrand to host TV documentaries and Albrechtsen, who Scott describes as "a terrific television talent", to appear on the Insiders⁴. It is obscene to take on these Sydney based News Ltd employees while making 16 Tasmanian ABC staff redundant. Hildebrand epitomizes the journalistic trend of facile opinion that prevails over the informed commentary of experts from various backgrounds.

Commercialisation and political conservatism are becoming evident as the ABC moves to centralisation. Mark Scott's ongoing commitment to commercialisation harks back to 2002, when as Fairfax's director of organisational effectiveness, he claimed that, "Smart, clever people are not the answer. What you want are people who can execute your strategy and Fairfax's strategy to create editorial to support maximising revenues from display advertising."⁵

Conservatism identified by Professor Sowerwine (2009)⁶ appears to have intensified since research by UNA (2007)⁷ identified ABC TV news "had a significant slant towards the coalition". The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), for example, with strong links to the Liberal

³ The Drum (2011) Trust and Relevance: Defining the modern ABC

⁴ Mark Scott (2012) The Australian, All views welcome at the ABC, like it or not.

⁵ John Pilger (2012) "Australia may be a Murdochcracy, but Rupert is only part of the problem", The Guardian

⁶ Sowerwine (2011) Nest struggle ABC bias

⁷ Gans & Leigh (2007) How partisan is the press? Multiple measures of media slant, The Economic record vol. 88 no 280

Party through its Executive Director and former Howard staff member, John Roskam, comprise 42% of three conservative think tanks represented on The Drum. Independent Australia (2012)⁸ shows the current representation of conservative think tanks on The Drum as: 61% conservative; 27% progressive & 5% independent. The implication is that these organisations' views dominate the public debate and promote opinions such as climate change scepticism, free market economies and limited government.

The move towards centralisation of production mainly in Sydney is of great concern to the Australian community who expect the ABC to reflect regional diversity and identity. This requires more than the occasional appearance on Australian Story and Family Confidential. The ABC must reflect and include all communities to capture Australia's identity.

I, therefore, recommend that the Environment and Communications References Committee:

1. Maintain the Tasmanian ABC production unit until the Inquiry has been completed
2. Review the allocation of resources to:
 - I. ABC News 24 to identify repetition and waste and redirect funds to regional areas to maintain staff skills and production
3. Evaluate and investigate the:
 - I. The preponderance of opinion shows/panels and the representation of conservative commentators

⁸ Independent Australia (2012) ABC drums up appearances for the IPA accessed <http://www.independentaustralia.net/2012/politics/abc-drums-up-appearances-for-the-ipa/>