

Inquiry into the ABC's commitment to reflecting and representing regional Australia

Questions on notice (to be returned by 1 March 2013)

1. Can you please elaborate and explain why it is so much ABC content production is being centralised in Sydney and Melbourne?

The ABC is not centralising production to Sydney and Melbourne. As set out in the ABC's submission to the inquiry, over the last three years the ABC's investment in production outside of Sydney and Melbourne has been significant and has been increasing.

Since 2007–08, the ABC has maintained an average production output in the states outside New South Wales and Victoria of 48 commissions per year. In 2011–12 the ABC commissioned 57 productions in states other than NSW and Victoria. Between 2007–08 and 2011–12, the ABC commissioned over 240 separate programs outside NSW and Victoria. Over the last five years, the ABC has commissioned programs from 72 individual production companies outside NSW and Victoria.

In addition, the ABC has commissioned programs from NSW and Victoria that have been mainly filmed in regional areas.

2. We have heard from witnesses at the hearing of proposals for a Tasmanian production quota. What are your views on this? Would you support the introduction of a Tasmanian production quota for news and current affairs? And also other programming?

The ABC does not support the introduction of content or production quotas. Such a model would interfere with the ABC's editorial independence, which is at the foundation of the Corporation's integrity and community standing.

The need for the ABC to retain independence and flexibility in commissioning decisions, to ensure efficient use of budgets, was recognised by the Senate Committee in the report of its 2011 Inquiry Into Recent ABC Programming Decisions, and also in the Government's response to the Committee's report:

“Setting and reporting against targets for ‘regional content’ will not necessarily promote regional program production, as the production locale does not necessarily reflect the nature of the content. In addition, the fluid nature of television production does not lend itself to hard targets for ‘regional content’ and may produce inefficient outcomes.” – p 7

“The Government considers that it would be inappropriate to mandate a proportion of regional content on ABC television, as it would encroach on the integrity and independence of the ABC. Forcing a mandated proportion of regional content could inhibit the ABC Board when making decisions about meeting its obligations as set out

in the ABC Charter. The ABC Board is responsible for ensuring that the programming mix is effective and delivered efficiently.” – p 10

Quotas would mean that location or method of production is prioritised as a factor in commissioning decisions over the efficient use of resources and the fulfilment of Charter obligations.

This lack of flexibility would result in inefficiencies in the commissioning and production processes, as the ABC would be prevented from making decisions based on the best use of scarce resources.

Setting targets for regionally produced programs will not necessarily promote regional content, as the production locale will not necessarily influence the content of the production.

3. Do you believe there are the skills, talent and production capabilities suitable for that production quota in Tasmania? If Tasmania were to lose the production unit, do you think they would have the opportunity to meet a local content production quota? And what opportunities would exist for Tasmanians to gain skills and employment in television production?

Refer to above answer. The ABC does not support a regional production quota.

4. At the hearing we heard questions and testimony proposing that Tasmania could become a hub for part of the whole of the ABC online content, given our first connected NBN advantage. Can you confirm if the ABC is looking at options to relocate part or all of its online unit to Tasmania? Has this been proposed to management? And if it is not being considered, why not?

The ABC is aware of views in Tasmania that the state’s status as a first-connector client of the NBN opens up the possibility of the ABC using it as a base for digital activity. In response to the proposed plan to shut down the in-house production unit, the Tasmanian Premier has expressed the hope that Tasmania could become a digital hub for the ABC, as has Screen Tasmania.

While the ABC’s focus to date has been on advancing its plan for a joint television production fund, the Corporation is willing to look at options for establishing a digital content development presence in Tasmania reporting to the Innovation Department.