

3 September 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Proposed cuts to the ABC's diversity of programming and in-house production

It's sad to think of the number of pleading letters I have written to politicians or the board of the ABC over the past 20 years in order to try to prevent cuts to loved and vital aspects of our national broadcaster. As I see things, the ABC exists to offer a mirror of Australian society in all its depths, breadths and complexities. It exists to inform, entertain and widen our horizons and perspectives, and to offer people abroad a window into this complex mix. Yet time and again it seems Australian politicians or, worse, the ABC's board, want to position and structure the ABC as if it were a mainstream commercial broadcaster.

Commercial television and radio seek to maximise audience numbers for as many of their programs as possible so they can maximise advertising revenue. This inevitably leads to the targeting of the Australian "mainstream", an imagined audience in which all Australians are of average intelligence, heterosexual, suburban, have 2.4 kids, a mortgage, two cars, a garden and a favourite football team. This imagined audience are assumed not to be interested in sophisticated philosophical or intellectual debate, or arts of any kind, or the many and various ethnic, sexual and social/political sub-cultures that exist in Australia, or anything outside of urban Australia unless it exists as a holiday destination. Australians, in this imagined world, shop and consume; they don't think intellectually, create, or find pleasure in artistic excellence.

Every time a little revamping of the ABC takes place it takes the ABC towards the mainstream, commercial model of broadcasting. The trend towards reduced programming, out-sourced production and diminished diversity bears all the markings of the neo-liberal love of the free market. What the neo-liberal lens obscures is the immense value and importance of a national broadcaster which can speak to and for marginalised, out-of-the ordinary Australians — whether they be from rural Australia, varying ethnicities, sub-cultures, ages, abilities or interests — and which can create programs and explore issues without the fear and self-censorship that is an inherent part of commercial broadcasting.

The ABC should not be seen as being in direct competition with commercial broadcasting networks. It is a creature of an entirely different species. It is a national asset, an important part of our social infrastructure and, as such, it should be the recipient of great respect and significantly increased, rather than diminished, government funding. Quite apart from the possibilities it offers in terms of breadth of programming, the ABC has traditionally been able to offer a nurturing environment for new creative talent, with in-house production enabling experimentation and risk-taking not possible in commercial broadcasting. In-house production also safeguards intellectual and political freedoms within content, something vital to the health of social and political debate, and thus democracy itself, and to the quality of programming. Australians need and deserve a national broadcaster which is not beholden to commercial imperatives.

I don't watch commercial television. I gave up on it several years ago because it didn't offer me a vision of Australia I could relate to and identify with, or the level of intellectual enquiry and debate I required, or the level of excellence in production I sought. Mostly, for instance, the dramas were soap opera-like in nature and subject, the comedy predictable and not funny, and the documentaries and "current affairs" lacking in intellectual rigour. I want a vigorously independent ABC. I want a national broadcaster that speaks to and for ALL Australians, not simply the "mainstream". I want a national broadcaster that has a strong tradition of in-house production, with all the quality, diversity, independence and expertise that enables. I want a national broadcaster that offers a rigorous, fearlessly independent examination of Australian political issues, politicians and commercial entities.

Given the commercial imperative towards the "mainstream", the average, the "dumbed-down" and the cautious, it is vitally important the national broadcaster caters

to those outside the “mainstream” and maintains economic and political independence. Please prevent further cuts to the ABC’s diversity and independence.

Yours sincerely

Christine L Banks