

The Secretary
Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017

Submission by Mark Zanker private citizen. This submission is submitted on Sunday 14 January 2018, as I was unable to do so on Friday 12 January 2018 owing to circumstances beyond my control. I trust this will not preclude it from consideration

At first blush this legislation appears innocuous, but it isn't. The explanatory memorandum conceals, rather than reveals, what the intention of the government is in bringing it forward.

The legislation is in truth brought forward because the Pauline Hanson One Nation Party insisted on it as a condition of their support for the Commercial Broadcasting (Tax) Bill 2017 and the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Broadcasting Reform) Bill 2017.

I refer to the second reading debates on these bills in the Senate Hansard for Wednesday 13 September 2017. The reason this legislation is now brought forward is made clear in the contributions of Senators to that debate. and also former Senator Lambie's comments on the legislation at the committee stage.

This whole legislative exercise is disingenuous.

My view on the legislation was well articulated by Ranald Macdonald, former editor of The Age in his open letter to Communications Minister Fifield of 17 October 2017, which I now reproduce in full.

Can we just be serious just for a moment?

Having read your piece in The Australian headed "Shrill Attacks on ABC Adjustments Are Hysterical, Unhinged" (9/10/17), I cannot believe that you, Minister, REALLY believe in what you have written.

You adopt the tone of surprise, astonishment and even of being slightly hurt by those who challenge your pronouncements.

* First, your proposed Charter requirement for "balance" on top of fairness, impartiality and accuracy for ABC news and current affairs coverage.

Yes, there are still some who believe the Earth is flat, but should their views be equally represented? The same goes for Holocaust-deniers, or even those who state that climate change is 'bullshit'.

Should their discredited views be given equal time, or they be equally represented on, say, Q & A panels – in the name of balance?

Most important, though, news stories often build from leaks, sources and whistle blowers. There cannot be 'balance' daily until all the facts are known. And, what happens when a reporter, seeking a response, is met by a "No Comment"?

Fairness over time – and accuracy. These are the prime objective of responsible news coverage.

It is such a crock that the requirement to imposing 'balance' is the price your government has paid for the (vindictive) Pauline Hanson's vote, plus the seriously threatening so-called 'competitive neutrality inquiry'.

* Second, there is the idea of enforcing specific controls on ABC board appointments, and on the time and allocation of regional and rural coverage through legislation and changes to the Charter. And, your threats to the ABC Board, if it does not publish the salaries of ABC staff receiving over \$200,000 a year for public consumption.

The board of the ABC and its Management have to abide by the Charter and will always be accountable to both the public and to the government of the day, provided they are able to meet the requirements with the funding given them.

There is no need to legislate for regional quotas and specific board representation. The Board and management are demonstrably committed to doing what the commercial media will not – and that is, to give rural and regional Australians a voice.

There is no need to actually change the Charter, it is enough for the Board to commit itself again publicly to serving all Australians, and recognizing what programming it needs to provide when the commercial media pulls back from national coverage and from children's programming. This retreat is taking place despite the commercial sector being given handouts and bonuses in the form of license fees removal (a saving of \$400 million a year) and the lifting of restrictions on agglomeration and special event program protection.

* Third, the ABC is by statute independent of Government direction with the responsibility of serving all of Australia according to its Charter. The current Government (under both leaders) has attempted to bully and weaken one of our most valuable and trusted institutions. It has reduced funding when more resources are required for the public broadcaster to do its job.

The ABC is publically owned, a vital independent voice in the changing media landscape and as broadcaster (with SBS) responsible to all taxpayers to perform in the public interest.

So – in the words of Mike Brady's song entitled "Where would we be without the ABC," just keep your mitts off and allow the ABC to do its job.

The burden for important, brave, innovative and vital broadcasting for all Australians is being directed more and more onto the ABC's shoulders, while the commercial operators just shrug theirs.

Yet, the Government continues to cut the ABC budget!

You, Minister Fifield, keep on saying that Australia's media outlets support your plans for "reform". But, have you thought why the unanimity of support?

It is obvious that the media moguls want the playing field to be tilted so that change or "reform" means increased profits and power for them – and a weakened ABC.

A national conference of ABC Friends just held in Sydney – and not attended by you or your staff – discussed Public Broadcasting needs in the changing media environment.

'Democracy Demands Diversity' was the theme of the Friends conference.

The need in this country for strong and independent voices who have the courage to tell it like it is. To that could have been added – 'and a transparency of decision making by both the ABC and by the Government of its policy objectives and determinations'.

Surely – listening to the plethora of right wing commentators, plus those who wish a weakened ABC, those philosophically opposed to public broadcasting, the IPA and members of the ever burgeoning Murdoch Empire and its advocates who have everything to gain from weakening public broadcasting here, in Britain and in the USA – you must realize that we all lose if the Murdochs (Rupert, Lachlan or the aggressive James) totally rule the waves.

Now is the time to determine whether we in Australia want plurality in the media, a range of opinions and viewpoints offered with the background solidarity of an ABC committed to providing the best of programming, of news, current affairs, children's television, rural and regional coverage, emergency services, documentaries and international reporting, music (classical and contemporary), emergency service reporting, arts and culture etc. etc. We do need a strong and independent ABC, as (to repeat myself) democracy demands diversity of voices, sources, viewpoints and information.

You, our Minister for Communications, describes the changes you are advocating as "timely housekeeping."

I would describe them as part of a deliberate and continued campaign of harassment and assault being inflicted on 'Auntie' ABC with clear malice aforethought.

Ranald Macdonald

For the purposes of this submission I adopt the views expressed by Mr Macdonald in full.