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House of Representatives
Committee on Communications,
Transport and the Arts

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Submission No: 263 DROWN, vic. 3818

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Secretary: *Maurice Poulton*

Committee
House Communications Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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SECRETARY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND
THE ARTS

Sir / Madam,

Re your inquiry "Adequacy of
Radio Services"

I have just been informed of the
existence of this inquiry, but do not have an
opportunity to prepare a direct submission.

However I believe that the submission
I made to the Mansfield Enquiry (1996) is a
relevant expression of my views.

I would add a couple of additional
comments.

① Implicit in this submission is that
we receive adequate signals for ABC Radio
National, Classic FM, Cypssland Radio (1007)
and even Melbourne 774

② We are daily listeners to Cypssland
Radio (FM 1007). The Regional New Bulletin
Cypssland Morning and the Country Hour
constitute the three main programs. The
quality of the programs is excellent
yours sincerely
Maurice Poulton

SUBMISSION TO: REVIEW OF THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE ABC

1. The introductory paragraphs of the Information Paper

I find quite repugnant several aspects of the six introductory paragraphs.

- 1.1 During this last decade, at the national, state and municipal level, Australians have experienced considerable reduction in the provision of government services. The rhetoric is familiar: 'strengthen effectiveness', 'better articulating scope of services'; the rhetoric no longer masks the reality, the big lie; governments reduce services. I once was naive enough to believe that the double-speak of George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' was foreign to democratic societies.
- 1.2 I have a very deep sense of betrayal about this review. During the 1996 Election Campaign, even after the election had been won, Mr Howard unequivocally reaffirmed his repeated commitment to maintain funding levels for the ABC. Yet less than five months later the government declares "the current level of funding cannot be maintained indefinitely".
- 1.3 I am appalled that the government should appoint a single person to review fundamentally an institution of such major importance and standing in the community.

2. The ABC and its place in my life

For the 40 years of our adult lives my wife and I have been virtually exclusively ABC listeners and viewers. We deplore commercial radio/TV - its mindlessness, its banality, its speciousness, its manipulative practices - no less vehemently now than in our early adult years.

Throughout these 40 years both ABC radio and TV have played a major role in our knowledge and understanding of international, national and local current events and issues [along with 'The Age', Current Affairs Bulletin, and Saturday 'Australian']; discussions and dramas about a huge range of life matters have contributed significantly to our personal growth; a wide range of cultural programs have enriched our marriage through the shared experience.

Music has always been important to me, but increasingly so in the last decade since the classic FM network expanded into Gippsland. I am unable to adequately express the importance of the Classic FM network and the concert orchestras in a journey to the soul.

On 8th August, the Australian Olympic team returned to Sydney from the Atlanta Olympic games. In welcoming the team at the airport [as reported by the ABC on PM], the Prime Minister spoke of the pride Australians felt in their achievements. I felt some moment of that pride during the Games themselves. But sport is becoming increasingly tarnished by commercialism, the Olympic Games no less than other sports: the highly photogenic Kieran Perkins with a litany of promotions; cyclist Shane Kelly promoting his safety helmet; the young trap shooter from Goulburn seeking sponsorship to make it pay, etc. That's our world. For my part commercialism and national pride are incompatible.

But my sense of national pride has deepened considerably in recent years: pride in what our national broadcaster has given my wife and I on a daily basis: pride in Australian programs and performances; pride in the opportunities provided to a huge range and number of Australian writers, actors, comedians, musicians and program makers and presenters - opportunities to grow, to enrich their lives and ours. That is a real source of national pride.

The 'Save the ABC' Rally I attended at the Melbourne Town Hall on 12 August demonstrated that thousands of other Australians also respond in this way.

3. What I expect of the ABC

3.1 Funding

That it is funded at a level worthy of this country. \$500m is an insult to the majority of Australians who care about the ABC.

I have no problem with the governance or accountability of the ABC. All my reading tells me that the ABC is an infinitely more accountable, leaner, more quality broadcaster than any of the commercial networks. It was interesting some months ago to read the comments of Chris Anderson, formerly a senior executive of John Fairfax, concerning his opinion of the ABC regarding financial control and efficiency.

3.2 Independence

The government has a responsibility to the Australian community to maintain its independence, to keep itself visibly at arms length from the ABC, to appoint board members worthy of our national broadcaster, people of demonstrated calibre in the broadcasting/media/ cultural area. Similarly I expect that the ABC management and board will ferociously protect the ABC's independence.

3.3 No advertising

I am utterly opposed to advertising - even the SBS variety of advertising. The principle is inviolable. I readily pay my 8c per day. I would happily pay 10c per day.

3.4 Wideband services

It is essential that ABC services continue to be geographically spread to all Australians and that the range of network programs be maintained. I find the notion 'more focussed role' utterly repugnant.

3.5 Cultural organisation

The ABC is a cultural organisation of immense importance. Its pre-eminent position in music - as employer, entrepreneur, trainer, experimenter and music broadcaster is world class. I find it inconceivable that a government would seek to dismantle an integrated component of such distinction on a world scale. On a lesser scale, but still very important, ballet and opera telecasts, drama productions, arts review programs, programs on books and ideas. These are program areas which enrich our personal lives and enhance our total community.

3.6 Quality programs

Implicit in everything written above is that the ABC produces quality programs whether for mass audiences or specialist audiences: quality must be a significant differential from most of the commercial material - the soapie GP, the current event AM, The World Today, Four Corners.

A characteristic of our society is the increasing dominance of the total media by a smaller number of media organisations. In this seemingly irrevocable dominance trend the role of the ABC as the producer and broadcaster of quality programs becomes more important to Australians.

The ABC has a number of small special units - rural affairs, social history, indigenous affairs, religion, science. Our society is dominated by so much GDP economics that massive problems of both global and national scale, major problems of the capitalist economic system itself, are too readily ignored. The ABC through its specialist units, programs like Late Night Live, Lateline, and Background Briefing, and its network of overseas correspondents has a major role in producing quality programs about the huge range of important national and global issues.

In recent times I have heard/read criticisms of the ABC asserting an over-indulgence of programs concerning indigenous affairs and issues. In the mid 1950s, as a third year student at Melbourne University, I studied Australian History, the best subject of my degree - but not a single word about indigenous affairs. In recent years a large range of ABC programs, coupled with newspapers and books, have given me a glimmering of understanding of the European invasion of their continent and our appalling racial record. I am grateful to the ABC for its significant role in this painful personal confrontation and for the opportunity provided to indigenous Australians to develop skills and programs concerning their culture and lives.

In my view, your review of the role and function of the ABC would be damned as an obscenity if this function was diminished or stopped.

Finally sport. Implicit in the above is that my interest in sport has diminished. There is a long tradition of sport being popularized on the ABC and then bought out by the commercial networks. I applaud the ABC for telecasting women's sport. But media changes raise questions about sport broadcasting, about which I have no opinion.

3.7 The cutting edge

One of the very important functions of the ABC, gradually developed in the Duckmanton years, is to provide a forum, a voice for programs at the cutting edge of arts practice and our culture: Janus, Phoenix, Frontline, Soundstage, The Listening Room, some of the documentaries. I find some new music very difficult to respond to; I cringe at some parts of some of the comedies on TV. Yet I applaud the maturity and courage of the Board and Management in broadcasting such work. The commercial networks play it safe; nowhere else would some of this writing find a voice. A healthy democratic society nurtures its creative talent; the ABC nurtures some of this talent. It is one of the aspects of our society that makes me proud to be Australian.

4. What services are important to me

Sections 2 and 3 above give some indications of this. Regional Radio, Radio National, Classic FM and the Concert Orchestras are the services most important to me; program categories of news, current events, personal/life issues, dramas, comedies, the arts in general, music via classic FM and at the Melbourne Concert Hall.

I don't listen to Radio Australia, yet reports I have heard/read over many years indicate that the depth and independence of the ABC programs is recognised and valued especially in Asian countries.

Similarly I don't listen to 3JJJ. Yet the Melbourne Town Hall Rally on 12th August showed me that Triple J is a really valued distinctive service.

The integration of music broadcasting and music making [the concert orchestras] is one of the wonderfully distinctive and effective functions of the ABC. The musical talent in this country amazes me continually; the ABC as a nurturer of composers, conductors and performers has played a vital role in this development.

Recently I attended a concert by the MSO at the Concert Hall where the major work was the Mahler Symphony No. 1. I could never express the pride and joy I felt as an Australian both during the concert and these subsequent weeks. Like the night I spent on Snowy Bluff in the Victorian Alps in January this year, it was a mind blowing experience. Long after our Olympic heroes, comfortable from their product sponsorship, have faded from memory, that Mahler concert presented by my ABC will remain with me.

I add one wide ranging qualification to sections 2, 3, and 4: I do not necessarily believe/accept anything I hear, or read, or see on any subject; every point of view is subject to re-examination. I don't think this is an uncommon reaction.

5. What I don't like about the ABC

Reducing Australian content. The previous Labor Government screwed the ABC; local content was reduced. The present government plans to decimate ABC funding; services will be reduced; Australian content, of necessity, will be reduced.

The 8c per day for the ABC has always seemed a marvellous service at such a small price; I would readily pay more for a more adventurous ABC with a greater Australian content. I believe this is a widely shared viewpoint.

6. Conclusion

The ABC is part of the core of my being. I find it ironic that at a time when the ABC produces and broadcasts such a vast range of programs which are so widely supported across Australian society, that the government should seek to decimate its funding base.

Last December the ABC organised and telecast a memorial service for Andrew Olle; this event I believe epitomised the capacity and functioning of the ABC. Andrew was an outstanding journalist whose abilities and manner, not his ego, touched the lives of thousands of Australians like my wife and I. The service was one of the most moving telecasts we have experienced; it was organised at short notice and involved a number of talented ABC staff. It was simple, yet superb; our national broadcaster enabled thousands of Australians to participate in an ennobling sharing of grief.

I hope, Mr Mansfield, that in your report to government, you will attempt to convey the sense of enrichment of lives of individuals, and thereby the community, provided by the ABC.

I hope that you will similarly recognize and report that attempts to hobble the ABC, our ABC, through euphemistically phrased expressions, like 'a more focussed role', will create an enduring legacy of bitterness and hostility.

Maurice Poulton
26.8.1996