



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS

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TABLING STATEMENT BY BOB BALDWIN MP, CHAIR – 21 June 2004

PRESENTATION OF REPORT OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS:

Review of the Special Broadcasting Service Annual Report 2002-2003

On behalf of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts I present the report entitled: *Review of the Special Broadcasting Service Annual Report 2002-2003*.

[ordered that report be printed]

Mr Speaker, this short report is a result of the Committee's decision to review the Annual Report of the Special Broadcasting Service that was tabled in this House in November 2003.

SBS is one of Australia's two public broadcasters and it has a long history and good reputation as a multi-cultural and multi-lingual broadcaster. SBS operates under a **charter** in section 6 of the

Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991. This provides that SBS's **principal function** is to 'provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that **inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society**'. The **Act** requires that in performing its principal function, SBS must – among other things – **promote understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people**.

The Annual Report notes the **history and functions** of the SBS: **SBS Radio** began in 1975 with two radio stations. Now the programs are broadcast 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and are heard around Australia.

SBS Television began in 1980. It now broadcasts programs in more than 60 languages and is watched by about 58 per cent of Australian households each week. Programs are drawn from a large number of national and international sources.

SBS also has a substantial **Online service**.

These services combine to give SBS the **capacity** to fulfil its principal function under the charter.

SBS has a strong reputation and the Annual Report refers to a range of its achievements. The Annual Report also states: 'This year, SBS conducted the most extensive **community consultations** in its history....'

However, the Committee was aware of serious concerns that were raised publicly by the Vietnamese community over SBS's broadcasts of the program *Thoi Su* on the World Watch news. The program, which was produced by a State-owned Vietnamese broadcaster, ran on SBS from early October 2003 to 6 December 2003. The demonstrations carried out by the Vietnamese community showed the offence that had been caused to many of them by the broadcast of what they regarded as State-promoted propaganda. This suggested there had not been proper **community consultation**. It also raises the question of whether SBS was **promoting understanding and acceptance of cultural and ethnic diversity**.

The Annual Report states that SBS's news services were watched by an audience of more than 8.4 million people in 2002 and its international and national current affairs audiences had increased.

In this regard an issue was raised by the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) in November 2003. AIJAC released analysis of SBS-TV's news and current affairs coverage of the Middle East. It said that SBS 'exhibits an entrenched and strongly pronounced **bias** against Israel in its news, reportage and selection of documentary material'. AIJAC saw a 'lack of responsiveness, indeed negativity...to reasoned and documented complaints.' AIJAC also called for SBS to change its complaints procedures.

In February this year the Committee held a **public hearing** at which senior representatives of the SBS were questioned about these and other matters that arise from the Annual Report.

At the public hearing, SBS repeated its apology to the Vietnamese community and acknowledged the hurt that had been caused and the inadequacy of its consultation process on this occasion.

When it was asked about achieving a **balanced perspective**, SBS responded that there over time, it aimed to run a broad range of opinions and preferably, documentaries would be self-balancing.

SBS told the Committee it was reviewing its **complaint handling** procedures and was focused on improving their transparency and independence.

The Committee was reassured to some extent by SBS's **acknowledgment** of these issues and the action it was taking to learn from them.

In closing I wish to **thank** those who contributed to the inquiry and I also thank my colleagues for their input. As usual Committee members worked together to ensure there was a balanced consideration of the issues before us. I commend the report to the House.