

From: Colin Smith [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, 30 July 2001 10:51 AM
To: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au
Subject: SUBMISSION TO SENATE ENQUIRY INTO METHODS OF APPOINTMENT TO THE ABC BOARD

The Secretary,
>Senate Environment, Communications, Info Tech & the Arts References
>Committee

Dear Secretary

I refer to the Senate enquiry regarding the development and implementation of options for methods of appointment to the board of the ABC that would enhance public confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC.

Might I say at the outset that this enquiry is yet another evidence of the value of the Senate, with its system of something like proportional representation and its structure of committees, as a forum for public ventilation and investigation of issues that really matter.

The present system of appointment to the ABC Board allows the government of the day to stack the Board. We need a system which ensures members are appointed on the basis of their commitment to independent and comprehensive broadcasting free of commercial pressures, and on the basis of the knowledge and skills they can offer. We need to ensure that the Board serves as a barrier against the inevitable attempts of the occupants of the corridors of political, bureaucratic and commercial power to muzzle and use and weaken the ABC.

I wonder if a system could be devised which enfranchised the many thousands of not-for-profit community associations and professional organisations of the country - both to generate nominations to the Board, and to vote upon them.

The organisations to be enfranchised would be those that exist to advocate or uphold some cause, value or activity, as opposed to organisations which exist to make money (ie private enterprises - but not to the exclusion of bodies championing the cause of free enterprise such as Chambers of Commerce) or to protect the interests of their members (ie industrial unions - but not to the exclusion of professional associations, or of bodies upholding the idea of unionism such as the ACTU).

(No doubt this part of my proposal is contentious - and it is indeed the part about which I have the most doubt. Perhaps one way of arguing for it would be to suggest that the self-interested bodies indicated [and I call them self-interested in a quite objective sense, without meaning to be pejorative - as they are an essential part of our society] already have a near monopoly of access to government and bureaucracy and to the instruments of mass media propaganda which they can use thanks to their access to huge amounts of money).

The organisations would have to be voluntary - ie not part of government or its bureaucracy. However, some such bodies with a statutory basis or charter should be included, and drawing this particular line would be difficult.

Organisations would also have to pass certain tests of their substance and bona fides. Incorporation and evidence of a certain minimum level of membership - perhaps also evidence of a certain level of activity – might be criteria. Judgements based upon their political complexion would have to be clearly excluded. Perhaps the problems of the registering authority could be reduced by a system of publication of the draft list of registered suffragees, along with a clear statement of the criteria, so that aggrieved and incredulous members of the public could challenge various inclusions or argue for additions.

The question of multiple votes for large organisations - ie votes allocated in proportion to the number of members of each organisation - would have to be addressed. With this would arise the question of whether groups of affiliated organisations should each be registered separately or registered as one through their peak body - or be given the option of doing it either way. The experience of the tax office in sorting out GST registration of voluntary organisations would probably be useful in considering ways and means of tackling such problems.

Although I am trying to find a way to end what is commonly described as "political" influence upon the ABC, I think political parties should be allowed to participate in the process. Indeed, I think perhaps political parties would be almost the ideal bodies to have on the board of the national communicator - concerned as they are with communication about issues which they consider to be of national importance. What one is trying to do is not to exclude politics - that fundamental of all significant human debate and decision without which national broadcasting would be banal and trivial indeed - but to guarantee the ABC's freedom from control by those who hold and wield legislative, bureaucratic and corporate power.

The essence of my argument for this approach is that the strength and worth of this nation resides in its wealth of voluntary organisations – its liberal democratic pluralism; that the ABC exists as a forum and focus of that pluralism - a forum and focus that needs to be apart from and independent of that other forum and focus - government; and that one needs therefore to provide the ABC with a basis of its legitimacy and freedom of action which is rooted directly in those activities, enthusiasms and causes which the community takes up in the public interest through its many thousands of voluntary non-profit associations and societies.

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