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Sent: Monday, 30 July 2001 10:15 PM
To: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au
Subject: ABC Board Appointment

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts References Committee
S1.57 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: ABC Board Appointment Procedure

I expect that I am not alone in puzzling over how to make this submission. Or even whether to submit. I have many colleagues and friends who see the current crisis in the ABC as so disastrous and its continuing decline so inevitable that they see no reason to expect any positive result from your enquiry. Many others, like me, see what is happening as so appallingly obvious that it is either irrelevant or impertinent to tell a Senate Committee about it. Hence I would expect that the greatest risk to your deliberations is that concerned citizens, shocked by the precipitous decline and impending destruction of a core institution of our society, are silenced by the apparent inevitability of it all.

So I submit for myself and very many others who regard this enquiry as a last chance to arrest that decline. As an objective, nonparty observer and life-long user (and critic) of ABC services, I see it as self-evident that the present Board and Managing Director of the ABC have presided over an unbelievably rapid disintegration of morale, performance and stability of the ABC. It seems equally self-evident that this appalling rate of decline will continue unless arrested by strong intervention. And most self-evident of all is that we should hold responsible the mode of appointment of Board and executive positions whereby they are political puppets, not representatives of any mission for a national broadcaster.

The citizens of Australia cannot expect political appointees to behave in ways inimical to the government that appointed them, nor to prioritize those qualities for which we have an ABC and which we need from it. In this situation, inevitably political commentary will be suppressed, and budgetary savings and popular ratings will be prioritized. Why then would we be surprised by what we have seen in the past year - the flood-level exodus of talent and the unremitting purging of experience and expertise, the grey mediocrity of repeats and imports and the demoralization and destabilizing of what was one of the finest of national broadcasting staffs?

I urge the committee to contextualize its enquiry by asking why we should have an ABC, and how the possible modes of appointment might serve those goals. I submit that having an ABC to earn popular ratings is a waste of taxpayers' money and having an ABC that strives not to offend the government of the day is an offence to the ideal of a strong and independent national broadcaster. It is still not too late to regain that ideal, but your committee has probably the last chance to do so. This is a formidable responsibility.

I would not presume to nominate modes of appointment that would meet these goals, but urge you to focus entirely on ways in which a Board can be freed of political subservience, and constituted on the basis of talent, experience and independence, understanding of the cultural needs of the world's most isolated continent and commitment to enquiry,

innovation, exploration and the diversity of Australian life - and to the challenge of drawing audiences to such quality, not seeking ratings by mediocrity.

Yours faithfully,

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