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To: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au
Subject: Senate Inquiry on the ABC

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2.8.01

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee S157.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission on the matter of your Inquiry on ABC Board Appointments.

There are at least two ways to "enhance public confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC as a public broadcaster".

- 1 The first is make sure that appointments to the Board are indeed uninfluenced by the political leanings or loyalties of the appointees. This is so blindingly obvious that one does not need a Senate Inquiry to work it out. (If the point of the Inquiry is to attempt to gather enough articulated community support for such a course to provide the political leverage needed to actually make it happen, then I hereby add my voice. Of course appointments should not be simply the friends of the government of the day!) Do you seek submissions on just how appointments should be made so that the people concerned are not cronies, lackies and sycophants? Frankly, it seems foolish for an amateur to try to suggest the mechanisms. You people are closer to the action; you have plenty of very intelligent and experienced people around you to devise a system. Maybe it's a matter of a joint committee, maybe it's a matter of a two tier appointment system, with one committee appointed by Parliament to in turn appoint the Board. I don't know, but I do know that it is not that hard. Just do it.
- 2 The second way to "enhance public confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC as a public broadcaster" is not a matter of institutional arrangements. It is rather a matter of the behaviour of politicians, particularly those of the government of the day.
- 3 The public does not think of the ABC as independent while it is being vilified by the government at the same time as its budget is being cut. Independence can be compromised by a Board, however independent it may be of political influence at the time of its appointment, simply being threatened by budget cuts. It is widely perceived, even by those who do not share the widespread distaste for Mr Shier, that the ABC is simply being cowed by the Government.

Politicians are supposed to be thick-skinned about criticism; so they should take it on the chin when they are criticised by the national broadcaster, or when they are asked difficult questions on its programs. (This applies to all parties.) They would gain respect if they

showed themselves capable of taking criticism, rather than being regarded with contempt for their nasty-minded vindictiveness when faced with it.

The ABC will irritate - profoundly irritate - the government of the day, whether it be Liberal or Labor, or perhaps one day something else again. It is time for politicians to realise that, in the big picture, the scrutiny and criticism to which they are subjected is a good thing, not a bad thing.

Since it seems unlikely that arrangements will be made for funding of the ABC to be made independent of the budget decisions of the government (which, were it to happen, might partially solve the problem) the best hope might be for politicians to show a bit more maturity in this area. I do not make this point in a cynical spirit, with a "but don't hold your breath" clause trailing. I know perfectly well that many politicians are intelligent and essentially decent, but find themselves in a culture from which it is difficult to break free, a culture in which even temperate and reasoned criticism is met with insulting put-downs at best, and other forms of vengeance at worst. I have no suggestions on how to change that.

You have to deal with it.

I.T. and E. Oakley