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Sent: Friday, 3 August 2001 5:04 PM
To: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au
Subject: Submission re ABC

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To: The Senate Standing References Committee on the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

I wish to make a brief personal submission to the above Inquiry.

Recently I wrote to the Prime Minister, John Howard (copy to Sen. Alston) and to the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley on several matters relating to the present parlous condition of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, commenting especially on the need for Board Appointments to be selected independently of party politics.

Federal Governments of whatever colour always insist that their motives in recommending particular people to the ABC Board are never ever party political and are always in the interest of maintaining the independence of the Board. The observed results don't support the rhetoric.

Current problems are presented as staff versus managing director and Board but despite their protestations of remaining at arms length, governments do intervene in ABC management via Board appointments and the manipulation of, and cuts in funding. The ABC's audience is usually left out of the equation and in the light of recent public comments by Ministers and others they are increasingly being seen as "the enemy"!

Both the Coalition and Labor, when in power, have been eating away at the ABC for the best part of two decades. I believe the long-term survival of the ABC rests above all on the cessation of the political see-sawing that so obviously affects the character of the Board of Management each time there is a change in control of the Government. History makes it clear that each Party has appointed its own friends and both have taken umbrage at perceived bias on the part of ABC news and current affairs programs. It is time for a politically balanced committee to make appointments to the Board so the ABC really does have true independence from government interference and is allowed to fulfil its Charter.

The Labor Party has been quoted as saying, "Labor fully supports statutory protection of the independence of the ABC. We want to ensure that the ABC will be free from politically or ideologically motivated attack by governments of any political persuasion." And that "The ABC needs the philosophical support of the Government of the day. A Labor Government will give that support, respecting for example, the right of the ABC to be critical of Government decisions even where we may feel that criticism to be unjustified."

That's fine, but the Coalition's 1996 Broadcasting Policy states, among other things, that the Coalition will "Cease the politicisation of the ABC Board" and "will ensure that future appointees to the ABC Board not only possess the broadcasting, management, and financial skills needed to guide Australia's pre-eminent broadcaster into the next century but also reflect a broad cross section fo the Australian

Community".

Surely these aims can only be achieved by establishing a bi-partisan Parliamentary Committee to be responsible for appointments to the Board of Management of the ABC and for monitoring its performance. As long as the government of the day has sole control of Board appointments the ABC cannot be seen to be truly independent and must continue to waste its energies, talents and funding on fighting for its survival.

We are meant to believe that each Party's appointments are entirely unbiased but coincidentally they just happen to be the respective Party's close supporters as well! No wonder the feeling is abroad that whilst both major Parties may well promise to do what they can to repair, maintain and further the work of the ABC, no political party, when in Government, will be prepared to rise above its perceived self-interest and forego the opportunity to control membership of the Board. Let us devoutly hope this impression is proved wrong

No Government lasts forever, though hopefully, the Parliament will. These days the Parliament is becoming a much broader church than the old two-Party affair. If party politics was to be taken out of ABC Board appointments then some kind of stability should return to CEO appointments, appropriate funding and whatever else the ABC needs to fulfil its Charter. Otherwise the National Broadcaster could well be doomed.

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