

From: Jenny Forster [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, 7 August 2001 1:57 PM
To: ecita.sen@aph.gov.au
Subject: Senate Committee Inquiry into Methods of Appointment to the ABC Board

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

This is a submission by :

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The Senate, on 27 June 2001, referred the following matter to the Committee for inquiry and report by 25 September 2001:

"The development and implementation of options for methods of appointment to the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that would enhance public confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC as the national broadcaster."

The public does not have any confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC board members. Both major parties state their intention to attend to this whilst in opposition. On election they seem unable to relinquish the power to make political appointments which are not in the best interests of the ABC.

The board of the ABC must have a strong understanding of and belief in public broadcasting. Success in areas of life like banking, law, commerce, economics and an allegiance to a major political party do not equip people to be guardians of the public broadcaster.

An understanding of and belief in public broadcasting must be the overriding criteria for appointment to the ABC board. The criteria set out in the ABC Act, 1983 seem to be too broad. It is only by the wildest leaps of imagination that we can connect the members of present and past ABC boards with public broadcasting.

I respectfully direct the Senate Committee Members' attention to the BBC website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>), particularly the section "Fulfilling the BBC's Obligations" which contains this sentence "The BBC conducts a rigorous annual process of performance review and the Governors (board members) publish their assessment of the BBC's performance in an Annual Report to Parliament". The other relevant section is "Listening to Audiences".

Such transparency should surely be written into the selection process and subsequent responsibilities of the ABC board.

I do not feel it appropriate that the managing director of the ABC should be included as a board member.

The function of the board should be to oversee the workings of the public broadcaster through its managing director, managers and staff. They should be separate from the government of the day. It may be a Utopian view but I would like to see selection to the ABC board as sought after, cherished and respected in the public mind as winning Olympic gold or the Nobel prize. The ABC is important for social cohesion, maintenance of democracy and for the pursuit and transmission of knowledge.

We do not want the board to be a cheer squad for the government of the day instead of fulfilling their duties as set out in the ABC charter.

I submit that the selection of members to one of our most important national institutions must be one of strict independence and transparency. Perhaps this should be done by a two-thirds majority on a parliamentary committee with some provision for vacant positions to be advertised and with provision for public nominations. Popularity with both sides of parliament is hard to attain but not impossible so nominees would still have to demonstrate their commitment to the principles of public broadcasting and have a wealth of experience in public broadcasting, the arts, music and science. I would suggest there should be more women on the board and that the composition of the board should reflect the multicultural and most importantly the indigenous sections of the community. Our ABC under the influence of the board, must reflect Australians back to themselves and aspire to the highest and most encompassing standards. Most scientists, musicians, authors and journalists who lead their fields today have been influenced and inspired by the ABC no matter how remote their physical situation in this large but remotely populated nation.

I would be satisfied with a Joint Parliamentary Committee to oversee appointments to the ABC board.

yours sincerely

Jenny Forster

7/8/2001