

The ABC of Public versus Private for Australian Democracy.

As our nation sets off into a new century and a new millennium issues concerning the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (formerly Commission) [ABC], raise vital and basic questions for all Australians. The most vital is whether in the future we have a public media acting in the general interest - of the people, by the people, for the people - as balance to the privately-owned media where the few with the most money inevitably call the shots. So saving the ABC should not be seen as a minor political issue of the moment but rather, along with constitutional change by referendum, a question involving the big picture issue: Can we create in this country a civil society that is in practice democratic - one where the diversity that is all Australians, can contribute to our evolving national character?

In the first one hundred years of Federation huge advances in travel and communications have given us the means of getting together as a nation and all joining in discussion and decision on aspects of *the content* of our society. A comparison of the Constitutional Convention (Con-Con) that took place in February 1998 with the Conventions before Federation in the 1890s, clearly shows this. In the first, a very select grouping of male leaders travelled for extended periods to make it to the Conventions whereas, with public funding to cover costs, delegates regardless of position, wealth or home place, could come easily and quickly to the National Capital. Direct participation by all Australians was not a possibility in the 1890s, but in 1998 technology gave us the means and public broadcasting by the ABC gave us the media, so that all who chose to, could view or listen to all the sessions in the ten days of the Convention. This "all" in 1998 could have been inclusive of every resident citizen of Australia as the poorest and most remote have access to at least a radio that can receive the nationally broadcast ABC.

The particular playing out of events that could have changed the constitutional structure of our nation that occurred here in the Constitutional Convention and subsequent referendum had elements unique to Australia. We have an historically established civil society where there is a legally entrenched political system where all Australians have the right to vote for their parliamentary representatives, established law and accepted practice of compulsory voting so that the vast majority actually do vote, and the constitutional provision for fundamental change by a referendum vote of all. However thus far our history has not been of the exercise of this democratic possibility to effect either a break from the legal form of our colonial past as a British constitutional monarchy or the declaration in our written constitution of our nation as independent and autonomous. We have, it seems at the moment, the means by not the actual political practice, to make change by a vote of all the people. So it seems to me that analysis of

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why the referendum failed to bring change can bring us to the core issues of about the realities of the political situation of Australia in this period of history.

I think the most fruitful place to start such analysis is with the ideological clusters grouped around on the one hand, notions involving *the private* - rights of the individual - and on the other, those involving *the public* - matters concerning society as an entity. Both of these clusters are represented as democratic. For some private rights and freedoms are the basis of our democracy, for others, the socialist principle of a political community committed to a fair go for all, is represented as a fundamental aspect of our democracy. Since Federation these twin ideological complexes have alternated as dominant in both the results of voting for our parliamentary representatives and the political and legal decisions made by Australian Governments and the High Court. Thus here we have evolved a mixed political economy where the free enterprise capitalist base has been supplemented by socialist elements. One of only a few successful changes to the constitution in 1946, gave the Commonwealth the responsibility for a raft of welfare payments which has effectively entrenched a safety-net welfare system in this country. In WW2 and the post-war reconstruction periods the Curtin and Chifley Labour governments set up a temporary dominance of socialist (public) ideology but this stalled with failure of bank nationalisation. However the basic elements of a mixed economy were entrenched. Government was the dominant player in capital works, that is in the building of major infrastructure. As well Government-owned enterprises, including State and Commonwealth banks, were a major part of the economy. In the mass media the ABC (then Australian Broadcasting Commission) was, as the name Commission suggests, an entity that operated on principles contained in the law that established it. In the mixed economy it was clearly in the public sector and the socialist ideological cluster provided its operating principles.

When, in the 1980s the world was reformed with the collapse of Communism and the triumph of Capitalism events happened here that changed the way we operated within this pair of ideological clusters. Under the Labour Government of Hawke and Keating the world-wide shift to monetarism and privatization was taken up as Australian Government policy. The result was that the only two parties (Labour and Liberal) that could be voted into government both seemed to be set on similar policy paths under the umbrella term *economic rationalism*. As in our political system the people's power is exercised within a two-party system, no matter how we voted we had to get economic rationalism. So inevitably since the end of the 1980s, the balance in our mixed economy has tilted heavily to favour the private.

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As both ideological clusters are represented as democratic there has not been a point in the playing out of the process of the increasing domination of the ideology of the private where it has been challenged as a threat to democracy. However that it is such a threat is now being perceived and clearly argued by a whole raft of public intellectuals. For me the most dramatic and easily grasped way of seeing this is by analysing what happened to Australia's mass media under the dominance of the private. We get quickly to the nub of it with a close look at ABC TV and Channel Nine.

Let's start with their origins. When Television came we were committed - even under Menzies' Liberals - to the mixed economy with public sector entities with government capital operating as capitalist enterprises. So ABC TV and the forerunners of Channel Nine were established as variations of the hybrid of public and private. ABC TV was added to the existing Australian Broadcasting Commission, which continued as a Statutory Authority to be run under the rules in the enabling legislation. Government supplied the capital needed to establish and operate the broadcasting network but users paid a licence fee that brought monetary returns back to the governments coffers. Under the legislation, GTV was a capitalist entity given a licence to set up and operate a TV channel but expected to provide capital to set up and run its operation. Its returns, of course, were expected to come from commercial advertising not government funding.

Now flash to the present. The political system has evolved so that now the voters' choices are made on the basis of two-party campaigns as seen on TV and culminating in a debate between the party leaders on one or other of these two channels. Channel Nine took over as the channel holding the debate in the 1996 election. Channel Nine has, of course, evolved as a capitalist entity where ownership is with one person, the nation's richest man, Kerry Packer. His exercise of control as owner is through the hiring and firing of executives and managers. As we all recall, prior to the 1996 election Packer's support for John Howard was publicly announced. Since coming to power in that election the Howard government has spent huge amounts on government advertising. Packer's Channel Nine, along with all commercial TV stations and now SBS, have thus become major recipients of government funding. Meanwhile at the ABC the private ownership style of control has been implemented following the appointment of Mr Shier, whose brief is to be the Packer-like controller who constantly changes the positions in management. At the Board level political appointments assure that Shier himself is under the control of a pro-government group.

In this context you don't need to be a highly qualified political scientist or a rabid Marxist to see how in our system is corruptible. Where the people's power is primarily exercised by voting in elections within a two-party system and election issues are

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controllable by media proprietors acting in sympathy with a Party that can give large amounts to them in advertising, clearly our rights to vote can easily become little different than they would be if we were in a one-party dictatorship.

If we now revisit the Constitutional Referendum result we may, as I did at first, just fall into a deep depression about the state of democracy in this country. On the other hand we can react in anger and take up the challenge posed to somehow reverse the movement of increasing dominance of the private and fight to re-establish elements of the ideology of the public that will move our political structures back towards giving the people a say by way of real choices. For me there is increasing hope to be found in grass-roots level public meetings where an increasing number of people are drawn to talk on the twin issues of Constitutional change and rescuing the ABC from privatizing ideology. So my conclusion is to urge all to join in the grass-roots movement by going to gatherings of *Friends of the ABC* and so swell people's efforts to restore our almost-lost Democracy!