

Submission to the Senate Inquiry on ABC Board Appointments

The ABC has been a vital part of our democracy and culture for many years. Its high standards of journalism and its promotion of public debate are becoming more important as standards in the commercial media generally decline.

The ABC's independence is essential to its ability to report on news and current affairs without fear or favour. Unfortunately, this independence has been seriously undermined by appointments to the board made on the basis of political allegiance. This has happened under a variety of governments but has been particularly blatant under the current government.

It appears that the board has in turn selected the Managing Director mainly on the basis of his ideology, he hasn't demonstrated much other suitability for the position. We have recently seen selection of ABC presenters on the basis of politics rather than on merit, and following the debacle of Media Watch, we know that presenters may be dumped if they don't tow the line. I believe that some ABC presenters are now self-censoring rather than get offside with the government.

A change of governments is not likely to change the practice of political appointments, unless the system of appointing board members is changed. A system where appointments are made on the basis of politics rather than on merit is unsatisfactory, regardless of whether the appointees come from the right or left of politics.

Various schemes would be improvements on the current system. One possibility would be to allow nominations for the board to come from the public. A bi-partisan parliamentary committee would make recommendations from these nominations on the basis of merit. The recommendations would be put to parliament and must then be passed by a 2/3 majority of parliament to be accepted.

I hope that you will recommend a scheme that will ensure that members of the board are selected on merit, and on their commitment to a healthy and independent ABC, and that you recommend that the current board be replaced with a new board selected in this way

yours faithfully
John McDonald
Robyn Sloan