

**SOCIALIST ALLIANCE**  
National Liaison Committee  
PO Box A2323  
SYDNEY SOUTH NSW 1235  
Telephone: 02 9690 1230  
Facsimile: 02 9690 1381  
Email: nlc@socialist-alliance.org

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The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications,  
Information Technology and the Arts,  
Parliament House,  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

### **For an ABC of, by and for the people**

At their August 4–5 founding national conference, 114 Socialist Alliance delegates from around Australia voted unanimously to present a submission to the Senate Standing Committee's inquiry into enhancing public confidence into appointments to the ABC Board. Specifically, they resolved to recommend to the inquiry legislative changes that:

determines the membership of the Board be publicly elected; that the managing director have no voting powers on the Board; staff representation be increased to two; the National Advisory Council's role and makeup be broadened; and that part of ABC funding be sourced from taxes on the advertising revenues of the commercial telecommunications and media industries.

Broadcasting is an important medium through which the right to freedom of expression is realised in a modern society. With publicly funded media around the world increasingly under attack by hostile neo-liberal governments, important alternatives to the big-business, transnational media monopolies are in danger. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is no exception to this global trend.

### **Editorial independence**

The public's confidence in the management and governance of their national broadcaster is falling because successive governments routinely under-fund and cut back the resources needed by the ABC.

The ABC's *editorial* independence is under question because it has no *economic* independence from those who decide how public monies are allocated. The unique, non-commercial nature of the ABC is in danger of being eroded.

Since the early 1990s, a cumulative total of \$120 million has been cut from the ABC, \$55 million of that in 1996, the first year of the Coalition's reign. Thirty-four per cent of its funding has been cut in 15 years.

Even if Labor is elected to federal government, this trend seems unlikely to change: the ALP has only promised the ABC an extra \$100 million over three years, 40 per cent of the \$240 million needed to reverse the cuts imposed by the Coalition.

The nobbling of the national broadcaster hasn't been limited to its funding. The present federal government is clearly attempting to meddle in the program-making decisions of the

ABC and undermine its editorial independence. Specifically, the 2001 Budget allocated an “extra” \$17.8 million per-year (for four years) exclusively for rural and regional “initiatives”.

This specific, targeted funding of the ABC opens the door for governments to exert further political pressure. In this particular case, the government has directed the ABC to use the funds to produce programs for one of their perceived constituencies: people living outside the cities.

This clearly represents intervention by the government in the program-making decisions of the ABC and undermines the editorial independence of the ABC. It puts into question sections of the ABC’s charter — a document spelling out the broadcaster’s roles and commitments to the Australian community, recognised at a legislative level — obliging it to be free of political bias.

It is not the place of government to grant, nor that of the ABC management to seek, funding that comes with many strings attached. The programming proposals given to the government were ones ABC management believed this government would want.

For example, no plans were made that the 3.2 per cent cut to the news and current affairs department — a national, not regional, department! — would be reversed and 100 journalists and sound and lighting technicians given back their jobs.

Governments come and go, and their ongoing malice toward inquisitive journalism will ensure their reluctance to adequately fund public, non-commercial broadcasting.

### **Political appointments**

This political meddling has been exacerbated by the appointment 18 months ago of ex-Young Liberal, and self-styled “mini-media mogul”, Jonathan Shier, as the ABC’s managing director.

His recent delaying of a *Four Corners* program, which cast new light on allegedly dubious activities of high-level Liberal Party figures, has led many to ask in whose interests is he managing the national broadcaster: the public and its need to know or an increasingly paranoid federal Coalition government?

Since the ABC’s corporatisation under the Hawke Labor government, managing directors have exercised too much control over the organisation. The fact that the managing director is chosen by the Board — themselves the appointees of the party in power — further erodes public confidence in their ability to manage the ABC independently of political interference.

The separation between governance and administration should be reintroduced. The managing director should be removed from the ABC Board and have observer status only at board meetings.

Staff-elected representation on the board should be doubled (to two) to better reflect the diverse range of interests and skills of the 4000 people who make up the ABC.

### **A representative board**

The ABC’s independence is threatened by governments’ routine practice of appointing their ideological mates to the seven-member ABC Board.

The main ABC staff union, the CPSU, pointed out in a July 3 statement: “the Board has failed to protect the ABC and its editorial independence and has failed to adequately protect the non-commercial nature of the national broadcaster...It has overseen yet failed to act on the

dismantling of production capacity in TV, and the diversion of funds away from program making and the areas that support program making.”

Decisions about who should govern publicly funded institutions need to be taken out of the hands of politicians and decided by those who are most affected by such decisions. In the case of a national public broadcaster, it is the public itself.

It’s time for the democratisation of one of the most important cultural institutions in this country. For too long, the governance of the ABC has been done by people — generously compensated from the public purse — with little or no experience in broadcasting, let alone guardianship of public, cultural institutions.

The board’s membership is narrow and subject to what amounts to cronyism. The historical practice, since 1932, of “jobs for the boys and girls” should end and be replaced by a system that has at its centre the election of *all* its members.

Models, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (which publicly elects all its board members, including its chairperson), should be seriously examined. As well, the ABC Board’s membership must be enlarged to better represent the broad range of interests and requirements of a diverse, modern society. Such a system should ensure that these people are drawn from the various regional and metropolitan areas of Australia.

The ABC National Advisory Council — a body publicly nominated yet appointed by the ABC Board — should be widened and be made up of several regional and metropolitan sub-councils as well as “expert” panels. They should be given genuine advisory powers that exceed the current toothless “consultative” role that is all but ignored by the current board.

### **Independent from government**

Clearly, such a model for better decision-making at the ABC cannot happen without better and wider sources of funding, while still remaining 100 per cent in public hands.

The ABC should not be viewed as an island in the telecommunications sea. Convergence of the many communications and entertainment technologies — interactive and digital TV, multi-channelling, mobile, 3G and WAP phones, broadband and Internet II — means that the public broadcaster requires many additional resources to develop content for these media.

Given the outrageously high profits enjoyed in the commercial communications industry in Australia, a tax on their advertising revenues should be levied. Any future leasing of the Australian airwave (spectrum) should carry levies that could help fund the program, hardware and plant development costs of the ABC.

These funds would represent a modest contribution to the public good, rather than going into the pockets of the media barons. In addition to the present system of federal government three-yearly grants, it would go a very long way in ensuring a future for Australian broadcasting in the interests of people, not profit.

CAMERON PARKER  
for and on behalf of  
Socialist Alliance