

From: sylvia murray
Sent: Wednesday, 30 November 2005 2:24 PM
To: ABC-Review, ABC-Review
Subject: submission

ABC REVIEW
TO WHO IT MAY CONCERN

I write in support of the ABC, which is undoubtedly the most important cultural institution in our country.

I would like the Federal Government to increase hugely the funding to the the ABC, for the above reason, in particular to ABC television. In so doing, I understand the motivation of the Federal Government in keeping the institution underfunded, fearful as they are of criticism of their policies from left-leaning influences in the ABC, as the government see it.

To counteract this fear, I suggest that funding, to ABC television in particular, be increased, with the strict proviso that the money be used solely for the arts and culture; that is for the production of Australian drama, general knowledge documentaries, nature programmes. and so on and for the purchase of similar from overseas.

ABC TV is certainly in the doldrums, with very little to attract intelligent viewers and surely they are to be considered and not forced into switching off or watching material which may suit the lowest common denominator of people. The latter are well catered for by commercial channels and by Foxtel.

The ABC is our greatest national treasure and should not be destroyed by any political considerations.

Sylvia Murray,

From: Stuart Paterson
Sent: Sunday, 27 November 2005 10:55 AM
To: ABC-Review, ABC-Review
Subject: ABC Review

Dear Sir or Madam

I believe you are accepting public submissions to the ABC Review.

I would like to say that I value the ABC highly. The website is my Home Page for my internet connection and I listen to Radio National in the car and on my iPod.

Along with the BBC, the ABC stands as the best and most trustworthy source of news and current affairs. As a doctor, I value the Health Report and other science and medical programs. I believe Philip Adams is perhaps the best interviewer around. He is always polite and respectful of his guests, even when of a very different political shade from himself, and is always able to clarify the issues involved for me at least. Lucky Oceans and the Planet would have to be my favourite music show, always interesting and varied. I initially lamented the loss of the afternoon spot, but since getting onto Broadband, I listen whenever I like.

The website is beyond comparison with any but the BBC's. It is a rich reference source as well as a fun place to browse.

I think ABC TV is suffering a bit from lack of funding. There seems to be a dearth of good homegrown drama of late. I did however love MDA when it was on, even if it was a bit terrifying to watch as a doctor.

Please value and fund our public broadcaster adequately. Along with public libraries, health and education, it is the sign of a healthy participative democratic community. Please relish and rise to challenges it offers the Government of the day. It is a healthy function of democracy.

Yours Sincerely



SPAA Submission:

Efficiency Review of ABC Operations.

1 December 2005

Screen Producers Association of Australia

SPAA is the industry body that represents Australian independent film and television producers on all issues affecting the business and creative aspects of screen production.

SPAA members include television, feature film, animation, documentary, TV commercial and interactive media production companies as well as services and facilities providers such as post-production, finance, distribution and legal practices.

- SPAA members are key stakeholders in the effective operation of ABC Television,
- SPAA members are significant suppliers to ABC Television,
- The independent production sector that SPAA members inhabit is characterized by low overheads, flexible freelance working patterns, adaptability and business acumen,
- SPAA members simultaneously produce and distribute television program material across multiple market sectors domestically and internationally.

1. Recommendations Summary

- ABC TV is the primary service and must be prioritised within the corporation.
- The Government should amend the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to have the Australian Content Standard (transmission quota and sub-quotas for first release adult, children's and documentary programs) apply to the ABC. Local programming will be undermined whilst ever the ABC is not required to "entertain, inform and educate" (taken from the ABC Charter) with Australian programs.
- ABC television content programming must be an independent alternative to the commercial networks' programming.
- Adequate increased funding in the form of ABC-Independent is needed to enable the ABC TV to properly and responsibly fulfil the needs of a reformed broadcasting charter.
- In establishing a commissioning model ABC TV must develop minimum terms of trade with the independent production sector.
- The ABC should examine the efficacy of internal production resources and where appropriate, divest itself of facilities that are inefficient or duplicate those available in the private sector. Savings achieved through this process must be redirected into commissioning of independent Australian programming.
- ABC must ensure Australian expression is central to all ABC commissioned programming.

2. Current Situation

Up until the late 1980s and early 1990's, the ABC had an internationally recognised reputation for underwriting innovative, high-end Australian drama. *Brides of Christ*, *The Leaving of Liverpool*, *Janus*, and *Blue Murder* are some of the best Australian dramas ever made. SPAA believes that a vibrant, confident public broadcaster that screens local stories in all their varied forms can make a significant contribution to Australian society. ABC Television is currently failing to meet its cultural obligations to the Australian audiences as well as its obligation to reflect Australian culture to the world.

SPAA has been concerned for some time that the national public broadcaster needs to be properly funded to ensure appropriate levels of local production. ABC production budgets have been neglected and at the same time ABC has been expected to convert to digital and take on new media initiatives. Australian drama and comedy have been the big losers; especially after ABC news and current affairs was effectively quarantined from internal budget cuts.

Without renewed commitment to truly fulfilling the broadcasters charter and the wherewithal to do so, it is uncertain as to whether the situation can be adequately addressed.

3. Priority in the range of services provided by the ABC

ABC TV enjoys near 100% penetration into Australian homes. ABC TV is the main broadcasting service with the largest internal audience share.

ABC TV is a vital alternative to the commercial broadcasting services. This service becomes even more critical in regional areas where broadcast services generally are more limited to those in major metropolitan cities. It must be prioritised as a service within the corporation.

ABC TV is required, as specified in its charter at point 6.1.a 'to provide within Australia **innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard.**' SPAA believes the ABC TV service is failing to meet its own charter requirements. A key factor affecting ABC Television's ability to fulfil its charter requirements is its ability to fund appropriate program initiatives. Content needs be a priority ahead of bolstering internal facilities and services and development of new or secondary platforms (e.g. broadband and digital side channels).

In providing a comprehensive service, ABC TV can only be successful if all additional broadcasting services do not negatively impact on the ABC TV's ability to deliver innovative and comprehensive broadcasting on the primary channel. The ABC is now supporting numerous services on multiple platforms at the expense of ensuring its analogue television service delivers on its remit. ABC TV is an important foundation for many other ABC services. It is imperative that this service delivers a comprehensive program that meets all aspects of the ABC charter. This includes the need for a majority of Australian programming across all genres. The most serious concern is the drop in drama levels from over 100 hours three years ago to 20 hours this year.

Television drama series and serials are the engine room of the industry. They generate the most employment in the industry are seen by the widest viewing public and they reflect Australian stories back to national and international audiences. As a priority, additional funds need to be injected and/or allocated to the creation of independently produced content, in particular adult drama for ABC TV.

4. The ABC's obligations: The Charter

SPAA believes that if the ABC is to fulfill its Charter, ABC Television must broadcast significant levels of Australian produced programming of a high standard.

The ABC's ability to '**contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain**, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community' is affected by:

- Local content levels, including the extent to which ABC TV commissions programs from a diverse range of local suppliers;
- The volume of first run Australian produced and majority owned programs broadcast on its main television service;
- The diversity of program genres, i.e. drama, documentary, children's and development of new programming formats;
- The extent to which the ABC TV can fully or partially fund program budgets and the competing output needs of other investors.

Standards are affected by:

- The size of the production budget;

- The level of producer editorial/creative flexibility which is affected by the specific needs of different investors i.e. the more investors the tighter the constraints;
- The producer's flexibility in assembling creative services and technical resources;
- The level of underlying support and engagement with the local independent industry to encourage ongoing development of skills and cultural capacity.

Local Content

- Australian content on ABC TV is unacceptably low. The ABC's spending on local programming has decreased significantly since 1991/92.
- To achieve the programming outcomes required within the ABC charter including '**to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.**', the ABC must commission a satisfactory level of local drama production.
- SPAA is extremely concerned that the ABC continues to commission and broadcast significantly less first release Australian adult and children's drama than the commercial free to air broadcasters and that overall its transmission of all Australian programs (inclusive of news, current and affairs and sport) is less than the commercial operators i.e. in 2003/04, 48% as against 59% for the Nine Network between 6.00 am and midnight.
- Currently the ABC is not required to carry a minimum level of Australian adult drama, children's programming or documentaries.
- Levels of first release Australian children's drama are 50% less than the commercial networks, which are required under the terms of their licences to comply with the Australian Content Standard of 30 hours a year (*Broadcasting Services Act 1992*).
- Production of local adult drama will total only 20 hours this year, a major decline from the 102 hours broadcast in 2001.
- The fall in Australian drama has been matched by a concurrent rise in imported drama of 125% over the past four years - from 342 hours in 2000/01 (or 3.9%

of total programming) to 771 hours (or 8.8% of total programming).

- SPAA estimates that first release Australian adult drama is less than 40% of that of the commercial networks.
- The ABC's failure to maintain acceptable drama levels is a key, contributing factor to the current crisis in the Australian television industry.

SPAA recommends the ABC be compelled and resourced to commission a minimum number of hours of Australian programming including a minimum number of drama hours. To this end SPAA believes that the Australian Content Standard, which is regulated by the ACMA, should be extended to the ABC.

SPAA recommends that all ABC television content programming must be an independent alternative to the commercial networks' programming offer.

- A recent children's television series, *Silver Sun* was substantially funded by the ABC but had a broadcast license agreement with the Seven Network, which secured the commercial broadcaster first release of the program. The single series was used by the Seven Network to fulfill nearly two thirds of its annual children's broadcasting obligation as required by the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. At the same time the ABC regarded it as part of their Australian children's content remit. The ability of a single program to acquit the cultural obligations of two broadcasters is clearly not serving the public or the Australian production industry and works directly against the ABC charter to deliver a diversity of programs that '*take account of the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and public broadcasting services*
- The secondary effect is to negatively impact on the over all development of Australian cultural diversity. *Silver Sun* or a similar children's program needed to be made by Channel 7 anyway, to fulfill its own license obligation, therefore the ABC's approach has limited the production of an alternative program, which would provide an alternative creative outlet.

SPAA recommends that the ABC must ensure Australian expression is central to all its commissioned programming.

- The ABC's willingness to directly commission international producers to the exclusion of local producers eg, *Outback House*, significantly compromises the ABC's ability to reflect Australian society within these programs. While these projects have as their central themes exploration of Australian history, the senior producing team contracted to the projects were British. Therefore the ability of these programs to '**contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community;**' is compromised.
- In addition commissioning foreign independent producers or licensing foreign formats rather than sourcing these services and products locally or via a local producer, limits our own industry development and undermines the international standing of the local creative industry.

Budget Levels

- Currently ABC commissioning budgets are low by international national broadcasting standards. The cash components are lower still. As the international market changes, international pre-sale opportunities for Australian programming are becoming increasingly difficult. There is a need to increase production license fees to enable full or majority funding options for ABC TV local productions.

ABC-I: Diversity of Supply

SPAA recommends increased funds be made available for ABC TV commissions though the introduction of an ABC Independent (similar to SBS Independent) commissioning model. Funding must be tied to "market" rates and take into account market trends locally and internationally.

- An ABC-I model expands the ABC's ability to encourage and promote the performing arts in Australia as specified in the charter. Commissioning of ABC's entire drama output from independents via an ABC Independent structure, will maximise the employment of Australian writers, actors, directors and crews.
- This will not only assist in stimulating the independent creative industries, it will also deliver to the ABC additional entrepreneurial the skills and agility offered by independent production companies.

- Adoption of an ABC-I model with production budget funds isolated from general ABC operations will provide greater expenditure transparency, separate the servicing of ABC overhead costs from program decisions and ensure an ongoing commitment to, and therefore stability, for the independent production industry. This will strengthen the ABC's ability to access a diverse range of program suppliers as well as the ability of the ABC to deliver cultural diversity to the Australian public.

Introduction of Terms of Trade

- Minimum terms of trade need to be established to ensure that the ABC negotiates reasonable production deals that do not unfairly impose external conditions e.g. facilities deals that provide relief for ABC overheads and facilities ahead of standard contract arrangements for the provision of programming by an independent supplier.

ABC Facilities

SPAA recommends the elimination of facilities deals and an end to the maintenance of in-house production facilities outside of news and current affairs.

- With the exception of news and supporting services, the provision of facilities and crewing resources is not an integral service that needs be supplied by the ABC. It has no legislative priority.
- The ABC failed to act on the Mansfield Report's recommendation to adopt a commissioning model against in-house production and facilities and has expanded the facilities in several instances.
- The commercial agreements that the ABC is entering into with independent producers substitute ABC facilities usage for cash. For example, the producer's use of an ABC edit suite may become an ABC equity investment in the program.
- Facilities deals compromise program quality and diversity of cultural expression. They also unfairly compete with private enterprise without delivering program benefits. The ABC justifies their usage because it is so short on cash; facilities deals are the only way to trigger the

production. With little alternative, producers are entering into these agreements. However many producer members report that the ABC facilities deal is highly problematic, that they more often than not compromise the quality of production, that the internal facilities and services are expensive and therefore inflate the book price of the budget, are poorly delivered presenting continuity and quality issues that negatively impact on the quality of the production.

- Facility deals also unfairly lock out legitimate private facilities operators and freelancers. The use of ABC facilities brings its own logistical and creative problems, impacts negatively on legitimate private businesses e.g. post production and facilities providers, and given reports of over inflated financial values being placed on ABC facilities, can unfairly inflate ABC's equity position in a project. This does not **'encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia'**.
- Facilities carry high overheads, accelerated obsolescence, high risk and the need for resource management and effort. In addition, maintenance of facilities ties the ABC to specific production methods and practices therefore restricting commissioning flexibility and ability to adapt to a changing market.

5. Technical Environment

- Adapting to changes in the technical environment has deflected focus on critical content issues.
- SPAA believes ABC TV Australian content quantity and quality has suffered from the diversion of new money towards developing new media platforms of digital conversion. While SPAA fully recognizes the value of these technical developments, it should not be pursued at the expense of the main service (see above).

6. Current state of the national and international markets

- ABC funding levels are low by international standards. Of 17 OECD countries surveyed regarding the levels of public broadcast funding, Australia came in at 16th, behind countries including Belgium, Ireland and New Zealand.
- Local content on ABC is unacceptably low compared to international national broadcaster standards.
- Audience sophistication has grown in the both the domestic and international market. This brings with it increasing pressure to increase production standards, which in turn places pressure to increase budget levels. This is particularly the case in drama. International pre-sales for drama are increasingly scarce.
- The international marketplace is dominated by big-budget American series and locally produced fare. It has become more difficult to sell Australian dramas abroad. This makes it even more important for the ABC to be sufficiently resourced so it can afford to make drama series and miniseries.
- Independent production quotas act to privilege local producers in their own markets; this is particularly the case in Europe.
- UK Independent production companies retain all rights in a program commissioned by the national broadcasters (BBC or CH4). Broadcasters only get a license for primary rights for a fully funded commission. Other broadcasters must cover the cost of each production within a set tariff range based on historical pricing, which OFCOM tightly monitors.
- International audience fragmentation is on the increase. Broadcasters around the developed world are experiencing increased competition for audiences. Broadcasters are responding by prioritising local programming. There is also a tightening of production budgets. In the case of the UK and Europe more broadly, regulation is increasingly requiring minimum levels of regional and local independent production. This further restricts Australia's ability to secure market interest.
- Co-production activity has declined sharply in recent years. Last year only \$13 million in co-

production funds were spent in Australia compared to a 10 year average of \$42million.

- There is currently little incentive for private investors to invest in Australian television production.

- The change to international broadcast services and regulations has increased competition for and barriers to major market pre-sales of Australian drama, children's and documentary programming.

- See also facilities comments above re: members report overcharging and market inefficiencies in use of ABC production facilities

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From: Peter Thompson
Sent: Thursday, 1 December 2005 6:05 PM
To: ABC-Review, ABC-Review
Subject: Submission to the ABC Review

To whom it may concern

I understand that public submissions to the ABC Review will now be accepted. I would therefore, given the limited time available, like to write a few lines in support of the ABC.

I have been a long time viewer and listener of ABC television and radio, because I find it to be interesting, informative and above all balanced.

Though far from being an intellectual, I consider myself a thinking person and so enjoy many of the programmes on the ABC that would never be aired on commercial radio. Apart from some SBS programmes, this also applies to current affairs on ABC television.

I am appalled by the ongoing attacks on the ABC by some politicians and commentators, allegations of left-wing bias cannot be sustained in my opinion. I find it incredible that the ill-informed and inflammatory comments sometimes heard on the commercial channels are left unchallenged, while the ABC is constantly criticised when it is clearly attempting to be impartial. I think that the ABC does a wonderful job under very difficult circumstances and given the continued cuts to its funding, the range and scope of its services are fantastic.

It seems to me that ABC funding should not be at the whim of politicians (those on both sides of the political spectrum have criticised the ABC when in government) but should be decided independently of the political masters of the time and board members should be independently appointed. Only then can the ABC fulfil its charter without fear or favour.

We really need a strong, independent ABC to set the benchmark, for the sake of us all.

Yours sincerely

Julia Masny

SUBMISSION

To

ABC FUNDING ADEQUACY AND EFFICIENCY REVIEW

from

Friends of the ABC (Western Australia)

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Purpose

This submission is not intended to rehash the many reviews and examinations that have been suffered by the ABC, but to deal with issues that are not so frequently discussed. Although there have been far too many reviews, they have at least been consistently favourable. Neglected issues include:

- failure to index ABC funding for inflation or increases in general Commonwealth revenues
- availability of Budget Funds
- demand for services
- existing funding pressures.
- the mediocrity of the commercial media.

It is noteworthy how private organisations involving billions of dollars and spectacular mismanagement can avoid any similar scrutiny notwithstanding the considerable harm caused to society by their misbehaviour and occasionally their collapse. Few reviews of the ABC have had any regard to the quality and range of the commercial electronic media, perhaps arising from a realisation that any comparison would be deeply embarrassing to commercial interests.

While any year could be used as a base year, it is the practice of the Friends to use the 1985/86 allocation as being the reference point for all future funding changes.

Our starting point as regards services is that the ABC should be a comprehensive broadcaster, with something for everyone. As that “something” should always be of a reasonable and consistent quality, it follows that there is a certain minimum funding level below which the ABC can no longer offer a satisfactory range of quality services.

It is also unrealistic to consider what services the ABC should be offering without considering the material being broadcast by the commercial and community media.

Role of the Friends

The Friends of the ABC started up about thirty years ago in reaction to an observed need for a support group for the national broadcaster, specifically the attacks on the ABC by the then newly-elected Fraser Government. FABC (WA) became incorporated in 1996. Each Friends organisation is autonomous.

The Friends' main work is to keep people informed about what's happening with the ABC in troubled times such as the Jonathan Shier period, when a new Managing Director brought some new and rather startling methods of operation to the ABC, or now, when the Howard Government's increasingly ideological positions increasingly pressure the ABC.

It is the Government that selects the members of the ABC Board. In recent times, the ABC Board has had:

- Ron Brunton, Institute of Public Affairs

- Janet Albrechtsen, Conservative, accused of journalistic fraud
- Stephen Skala director, Centre for Independent Studies
- Judith Sloan Academic Advisory Council, Centre for Independent Studies

Extensive attacks by Senator Santoro at Estimates hearings inevitably discourages managers from decisions that risk such criticism.

Further, government Ministers themselves regularly participate in what are in effect attacks on the ABC's independence. Those 68 complaints against AM that were clearly intended to force a more politically compliant line were not initiated or filled out by members of the public; it was the work of the then Minister for the ABC, Senator Alston, and his office staff. Mr Alston was more recently appointed by the Howard Government to be Australia's High Commissioner to the U.K.

However, while it is the Government that provides the ABC with its funding, it must be acknowledged that the Coalition has most certainly been less stingy than the ALP. While there have been debates about other sources of funding, such as the BBC model, the latter arose in quite a different environment, nor has it prevented dismemberment by the Blair Government.

Political Environment

Academics have persuasively suggested that the forever embattled nature of the ABC is because a public broadcaster that is doing its job is involved in all significant public controversies. However the great value of a public broadcaster is that it is a neutral space which is responsive to the interests of all in society and where matters of the public good could be debated, considered and agreed upon.

So, supporters of the ABC are in fact often fighting for the maintenance not just of a forum free from commercial pressures, but also for a forum that allows undistorted communication, consensual procedures, rational debate and at least the possibility of expressions of social unity.¹ In this view, public broadcasters are a forum for the expressions of difference which always occur in the public life of a society².

Since its election in 1996, the Howard Government appears to have been systematically working to suppress dissent in a number of ways. While most governments try that, the inner circle of the Howard Government appears to be much more ideological in its approach than has been the case for any other post-war Australian government.

Like the Blair government, the Howard government appears to be mercantilist at home and imperialist abroad. Socially, its ideology is very much that of the British class system of the early nineteenth century with its deep antagonisms and its deeply hypocritical distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor, reminiscent of the Poor Laws.

Fortunately, some public provision of culture does seem to be acceptable; their objection is to a public broadcaster propagating anything that conflicts with the

¹ Perpetual Crisis: The Politics Of Saving The ABC, *Media International Australia*, no. 94

² *ibid.*

government's position. In the case of the ABC, interestingly, the attacks since 1996 have not taken the form of funding cuts, but on programmes that present a point of view with which the government disagrees.

Many well-based complaints have been made about the Hard Right/ conservative/ reactionary bias of most ABC Board members. We the Friends have been given frequent opportunities to point out that the current Board would certainly fail any reasonable test for bias. However, there is no obvious sign that any of them want ABC funding cut.

This bias will undoubtedly reduce the capacity of the ABC as an organisation to exploit existing opportunities. It also will force it to be less innovative in any field involving greater openness and public participation. Not least, such a Board will not wish to encourage any ABC operation that consistently represents Right-wing views in a poor light, however accurate it may be.

It is only proper to note the self-justifying need for reviews to make recommendations, however unnecessary or arbitrary.

Services NOT Tax Cuts

People increasingly want more spending on social services rather than on tax cuts.

[1] The study conducted by the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University shows Australians are now less interested in tax cuts and want more money spent on health.

Dr Shaun Wilson conducted the study and says as far as domestic policies are concerned, health care is now the leading issue in Australia.

"When given a choice between lower taxes and higher social spending, the Australian public is increasingly moving away from tax cuts," he said. "[It is] starting to want higher social spending to take up some of [the] perception on falling standards in key areas, like health care and Medicare," he said.³

[2] Eighty-three per cent of Australians would be willing to pay an extra \$3.50 on their monthly power bills if that was the price of boosting the Federal Government's mandatory renewable energy target to 10 per cent by 2010, according to a poll conducted by Greenpeace.

Greenpeace climate specialist Catherine Fitzpatrick said: "This clear response is the strongest indication yet that Australians are willing to pay more for clean, renewable energy."⁴

³ http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003/02/item20030210080711_1.htm

⁴ www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/06/10/1055220595490.html

[3] The Australian Consumers Association (ACA) says most people would be prepared to pay higher taxes if it meant an improvement in the nation's health services.

ACA health policy officer Martyn Goddard says recent polls show people are very concerned with many aspects of the health system, including mental and Indigenous health, aged care and preventative medicine.⁵

[4] One of the surveys of 1000 people nationwide shows that three-quarters would prefer the Federal Government to spend money on improving services such as schools and hospitals rather than offering a tax cut. Only 18 per cent would prefer the tax cut.

Significantly, nearly seven in 10 Coalition voters would prefer the money to be spent on improving services. Less than one-quarter of Coalition voters would prefer the tax cut.⁶

[5] “..... in 1990 when we conducted the Australian Election Study at the ANU, about 1 in 5 voters, 20% were telling us that they were prepared to pay more tax to fund health and education services, and when we asked them late last year a very similar question, how much money ... are you prepared to pay more tax for better services, for health and Medicare that number had risen to 69% and for public education the number had risen to 63%. And that is a very remarkable change. Same approach to surveying, same questions and we get a very different result, something like a 40% jump or more over that time period. ...”⁷

[6] Howard's shift to spending in 2004 was probably part electioneering and part concession to the scope and endurance of Hawke and Keating-era policy. But larger forces were at work. Howard was a reluctant pragmatist, moving ground to accommodate the public's changing priorities. One simple measure of these priorities is to ask voters whether they'd prefer a tax cut or more social spending. Looking at how the public has responded to this choice over the last four decades tells a powerful story. Not since the 1960s has the Australian public been so supportive of spending. Trevor Breusch and I have shown that this new 'fiscal mood' displaces the tax-cutting politics of the 1980s, which so constrained Labor's spending ambitions then (2004). The pro-spending mood is being generated, among other things, by perceptions that the government is neglecting public services, and Howard's shift was designed to stop Labor benefiting from this.⁸

Nor would the “battlers” / “aspirational classes” / “wealth-creators” seem to be oppressively taxed.

⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/s918065.htm>

⁶ <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/16/1060936100976.html>

⁷ ABC, [The National Interest: 9 May 2004 - Tax cuts or public services?*](#)

⁸ A little bit of Alabama: On Australia's low tax consensus, *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, May 2005

[7] Australia is a low-tax nation with fewer than one in five workers paying the top marginal rate of 47 cents in the dollar.

Against claims that middle and upper income workers pay too much tax, an Australian Council of Social Service study placed Australia sixth lowest taxed country of 30 Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development nations.⁹

Not surprisingly, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) was sufficiently concerned by such views to issue a press release and monograph suggesting that people didn't actually want such a trade-off. A current and previous ABC Director – Steven Skala and Judith Sloan – are officebearers of the CIS.

Despite the many promises made during the course of the many flog-offs that have been driven both by States and by the Commonwealth, and more particularly having experienced the results, people want good, non-profit, government-owned public services.

“Concluding thoughts

What are the implications of these findings for public policy, and especially for Labor, which is desperate for new ideas and needs to get cracking? Firstly, there is no popular support for a 'third way' type agenda advocated by the likes of Mark Latham. People want effective public services. They don't want another way.

Secondly, there is a strong level of support for policy changes which remove the profit motive from the delivery of public services. The contract state must be rejected, and that includes the contracts on which senior public servants are employed.

Thirdly, a move to renationalise prisons, electricity, gas, public transport and even the Commonwealth Bank is likely to be popular. In the case of electricity and public transport in Victoria, the private operators are in deep financial trouble and prospective buyers are very hard to come by. In the case of public transport, the assets were not sold. They were given away, and it would not be surprising if some might like to simply give them back.

All this returns us to the question with which we began: public attitudes and the mixed economy. Nearly two decades ago, Braithwaite was worried that the increasingly bipartisan support by Labor and the conservatives for the neoliberal agenda would eventually undermine the strong support for the mixed economy he had uncovered in the National Social Science Survey. The ISR's public good survey shows that his fears were unfounded. The mixed economy remains a popular concept everywhere, except in the halls of political power around the country where someone else's agenda reigns supreme.¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/06/09/1055010928883.html>

¹⁰ What role for the public sector?, *DISSENT*, No. 8, Autumn-Winter 2002, pp. 8-12

The Organisation

ABC's legislative obligations

WA FABC's view is that the ABC no longer has the funds to adequately meet its Charter obligations. That position was implicitly denied by the Managing Director at an Estimates hearing¹¹, but was implicitly acknowledged by the Chairman in a later speech¹². It should of course be remembered that the Charter has no legal effect, although it is a formal and explicit guide as to Parliament's expectations.

Although there is no magic number as regards the output of drama (or of any of the other fifteen genres), ultimately the ABC is intended to be a comprehensive broadcaster. It is quite clear from its low output of drama, and of other genres, and of its excessively large output of News & Current Affairs, that it is not. It is equally clear that that failing is due to underfunding by the government of today.

Nor is the issue simply one of output. Quality does matter, so the continuing reductions in support staff inevitably reduce the collective experience and collective memory that can be applied, especially in News & Current Affairs.

Management

While we greatly value the ABC, what it does, and what it could do, we also expect a correspondingly high standard from ABC management.

It does seem the middle-level and senior managers have shown quite reasonable ability to maintain quality and range despite diminishing resources. It seems to be personnel relations where the real problems are occurring. Disputes between ABC management and staff have historically involved matters of principle rather than pay and conditions.

Managerialism seems to be quite a destructive philosophy, a much better approach being to treat the employees as a group of people to be encouraged rather than as problems to be controlled. It is equally damaging to any organisation with a long-term commitment to excellence. Our ABC's strength lies in its staff, and in their collective experience and collective memory.

As good personal and industrial relations are essential for excellence at the ABC, we are concerned about complaints suggesting poor management.

Late last year, Radio National staff struck for twenty-four hours. They asserted a number of reasons for the action:

1. Financial mismanagement
2. a workplace 'restructure by stealth' which represents nothing less than the end of Radio National as a specialist network
3. failure to make decisions on network and staff matters within a reasonable time, with serious consequences
4. appalling communication styles and failures

¹¹ Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee Hansard, 23 May 2005, p50

¹² ABC faces funding challenges: chairman, ABC Online, 9 August 04

5. downgrading of arts and culture output on the network
6. undermining roles of specialist editors and front-line managers
7. a depressing catalogue of mishandling of individual employees in matters of employment status, allocation to programs, and career development
8. very poor communication with staff on personal, professional and editorial matters, including antagonistic, insensitive and contradictory behaviour

Repeated allegations have been made that bullying by management is rife. Although the Managing Director claimed in 2004 at an Estimates hearing that bullying did not exist at the ABC, Senator George Campbell said he had a file full of material detailing alleged incidents of bullying, including five bullying cases identifying the Victorian state editor of news and current affairs, Marco Bass, as a cause for the complaint.

To quote from the CPSU website,

These are stories about an organisation out of control. Management are misusing the misconduct and performance management systems as tools for bullying. That is why management excluded complaints over misconduct or performance management issues under their bullying policy. It should come as no surprise that few people have lodged bullying grievances under their new policy. The management policy was designed to protect managers- not to prevent bullying.

To quote a letter to *The Australian* at that time,

ABC management does not identify intimidation, insults and demeaning behaviour towards staff as bullying - rather it is seen as clever management and those responsible are rewarded for their initiative. If staff dare to stand up to one of the bullies, they soon find themselves a management target - and this has proved to be a very effective means of keeping a lid on staff complaints.¹³

Life assurance cover has apparently been scrapped for foreign correspondents, with their health costs cover capped at half-a-million.

Subsequent to his attendance at the WA-hosted National Conference of the Friends in 2003, Mr Balding has refused to deal directly with any Friends organisation. All enquiries and correspondence have been referred to other senior managers. At best, WA FABC has found them to be politely unhelpful; at worst, dismissive and arrogant.

Attendance at Estimates hearings is one of those unpleasant things that people earning half-a-million a year are expected to do. It would be no more unpleasant than appearing before a hostile Industrial Magistrate might be for an trade union underpayments clerk, on one-twentieth of the pay.

As has been pointed out to Mr Balding, it would seem an elementary duty of the most senior manager of a much-discussed public instrumentality to keep in contact with the Friends. Any such connection will have its difficulties, but presumably their

¹³ http://www.cpsu.org.au/news/1092354098_22654.html

exceptional capacity to handle such matters is why such people are paid half-a-million a year. Since senior managers of a statutory body are expected to tolerate public criticism, the sensible approach is to talk to potential public critics to try and amicably resolve matters in dispute.

Statutory authorities are entitled to maintain contacts with support organisations, as long as doing so advances their Charter. Even departments do so - the Defence Department has much closer links to its Kokoda Foundation, for instance, than the ABC does to the Friends.

In conclusion, an intolerant and unresponsive management may be at least as serious a problem as budget stringencies for what seeks to be an excellent public broadcaster. Many of the improvements for which senior management claims the credit appear to arise from staff or lower-level management, ABC Online being the classic example. Therefore the Review should focus very closely on the real capacity of management – especially senior management - to lead and support their staff.

ABC in W.A.

WA FABC's view is that the ABC in W.A. delivers a good range of basic everyday radio services, but has little to offer regarding anything more sophisticated.

News, Stateline, Roller Coaster (children), *How the Quest Was Won*, and *Gardening Australia* (one portion of each once-a-week episode) are the only regular TV productions made here. *Stateline* is the result of budget cuts some years ago that reduced State newscast to one segment a week. *How the Quest Was Won* is a mediocre programme that was created largely to exploit some tied (NII) funds that would otherwise have been unavailable; *George Negus Tonight* was cut to make space.

Lack of coverage of WA-based arts and contemporary issues such as environmental concerns are a subject of regular complaint by members and others. However, nationally, arts coverage appears to have increased on radio but not on television.

Inadequate rural and regional services are a regular source of complaint. They relate both to the quality of transmission and to the quality of content. 558 Wagin, for instance, was a station established using NII funding (i.e. political product placement). Dissatisfaction with its service has been sufficient to cause a push to have 720 6WF broadcast through Wagin.

Adaptation

Impacts of the changing media and technological environment on the ABC are overrated. While the internet provides very many alternative sources of news and information, its effective penetration is limited to the small numbers of people seeking alternatives from the mainstream media¹⁴.

New technologies have consistently been seen as threatening to utterly obliterate all that have gone before. Television was supposed to herald the death of radio, cinema, and the theatre, but they all later recovered¹⁵. In both Australia and overseas there was the expectation in the early nineties that the arrival of pay platforms would eliminate free-to-air broadcasters from the bulk of the market. Yet, newspapers

¹⁴ *Freedom of the Press in Australia*, internet, Chris Nash, undated but 2003

¹⁵ Unique Culture Unique Value, Donald McDonald, 2002

remain an important part of the media, even though in their modern form they've have been around since 1622. People still only have 24 hours in a day.

It is very clear that the ABC is efficiently using the multimedia opportunities that its limited funding will allow.

The very high cost of technological obsessions was demonstrated by the higher cost and poorer service resulting from the Government's replacement of the analogue mobile phone system with CDMA. That having proved a very costly exercise, Telstra is now to discard CDMA and focus on its GSM network, even though it has much poorer coverage. The unnecessary cost is greatly increased by the involvement of binding contracts with the private sector, which naturally means that bad telecommunications network decisions can no longer be reversed simply by Ministerial fiat.

Lack of real content on the digital channels is obviously one reason for the subdued adoption of digital sets by consumers. The policy and funding limitations imposed on the ABC greatly hinder it from providing the quality and range of material that the Minister and Government claim to want. WA FABC supports the ABC's submission regarding its digital services, including ABC2¹⁶.

Introducing (unnecessary) digital technology is much more expensive for the ABC than for commercial TV stations, because the former has 137 TV transmitters while each of the latter has only a few. Digital technologies have a high cost, a rapid depreciation, and therefore require relatively more money.

Briefly, the ABC should not have to pay for bad telecommunications decisions.

Funding

1995 – The Alston report	...the Committee believes that the basic structure of the ABC is sound and that the organisation is considerably stronger and more relevant to the Australian community now than it was ten years ago ¹⁷ .
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ABC funding could be spent in a wide range of more or less equally sensible ways. It would seem highly unlikely that the gains from having an external reviewer justify the cost and time required.

An appropriate measure of the ABC's efficiency is by comparison to Australian commercial media, and to overseas public broadcasters. Professor Glenn Withers¹⁸ calculates that per broadcast hour ABC TV costs only 36% of the average commercial network. He adds that British citizens pay more than 300% more per person to fund the BBC, while Canadians pay \$150% more per person for the CBC. By any measure the ABC is overwhelmingly well regarded, and extraordinarily cheap.

¹⁶ ABC Submission to the Review of the Provision of Services Other Than Simulcasting by Free-to-Air Broadcasters on Digital Spectrum

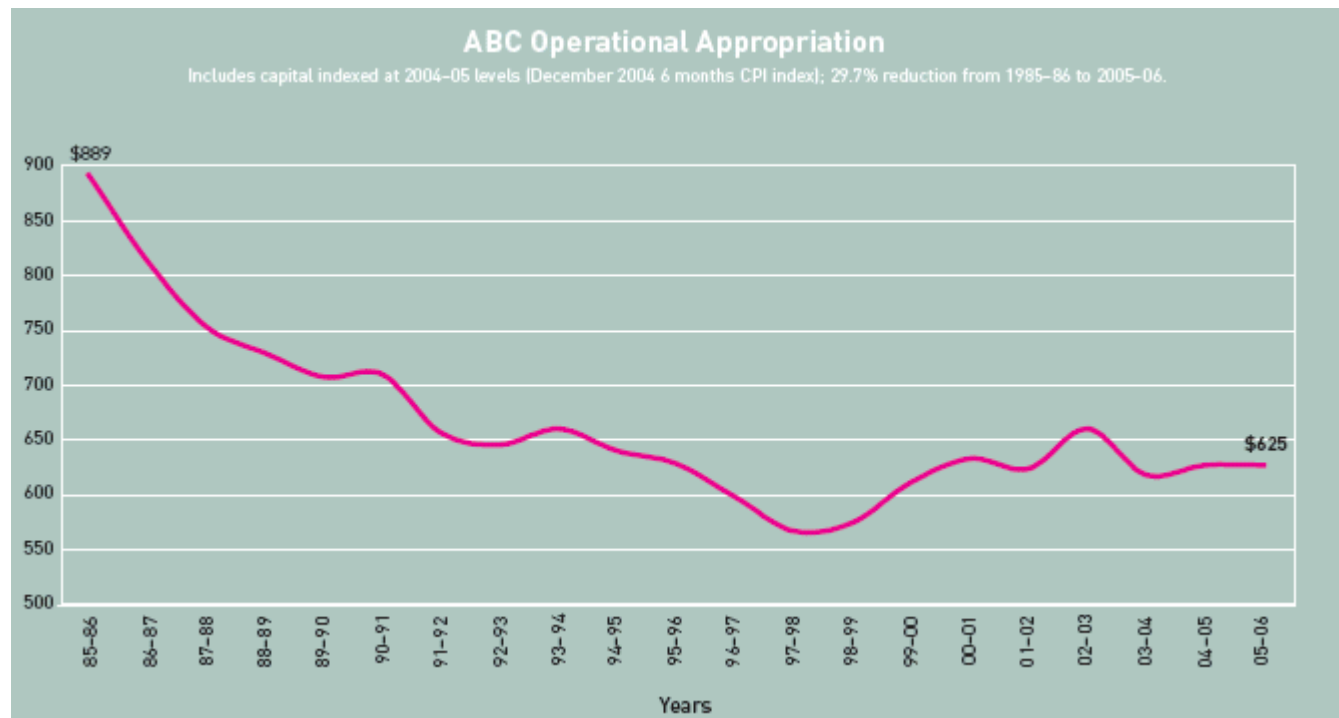
¹⁷ Our ABC – Report of the Senate Select Committee on ABC Management and Operations, AGPS, March 1995

¹⁸ (Australian Financial Review, 22 March 2000)

Tied funding is now becoming a significant part of the ABC's budget. National Interest Initiative (NII) funds are quite specifically targeted at regional ABC services; a desire to use all the available NII funding was reported to have driven the closure of George Negus Tonight and the rearrangement of Gardening Australia¹⁹. In February, the ABC announced that "the Government will allocate \$1.5 million to enable up to 50 rural and regional communities to access five ABC radio services, including Radio National and NewsRadio."²⁰

cf Inflation or Budget Revenue Growth

Changes in the ABC's real operational funding since 1985/6 are well portrayed in a graph that appears in each Annual Report, suitably updated of course. It is reproduced below.



The trend is clearly of falling funding during the period of the Labor government at least for the whole of its term from 1985/6, followed by stable funding during the period of the Coalition government.

A comparison with both the increase in the CPI and the increase in total Commonwealth outlays for that period demonstrates that real funding for the ABC has fallen markedly. Those numbers cannot in themselves prove or disprove insufficient funding, but naturally they much more strongly support the "insufficient funding" camp.

¹⁹ Aunty shuffle leads to ructions, The Australian, 4 Nov 04
²⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200502/s1311260.htm>

As regards inflation itself, the index data from the ABS indicate that inflation has increased by 186% since the end of the second quarter of 1986.

**LONGER TERM SERIES:
CPI All Groups, Weighted Average of Eight Capital Cities, Index Numbers(a)**

Year	Quarter ending			
	31 March	30 June	30 September	31 December
1985	68.1	69.7	71.3	72.7
1986	74.4	75.6	77.6	79.8
1987	81.4	82.6	84.0	85.5
1988	87.0	88.5	90.2	92.0
1989	92.9	95.2	97.4	99.2
1990	100.9	102.5	103.3	106.0
1991	105.8	106.0	106.6	107.6
1992	107.6	107.3	107.4	107.9
1993	108.9	109.3	109.8	110.0
1994	110.4	111.2	111.9	112.8
1995	114.7	116.2	117.6	118.5
1996	119.0	119.8	120.1	120.3
1997	120.5	120.2	119.7	120.0
1998	120.3	121.0	121.3	121.9
1999	121.8	122.3	123.4	124.1
2000	125.2	126.2	130.9	131.3
2001	132.7	133.8	134.2	135.4
2002	136.6	137.6	138.5	139.5
2003	141.3	141.3	142.1	

(a) Base of each index: 1989-90 = 100.0

Alternatively or additionally, one can have regard to the change in total Commonwealth revenue since 1986.

As indicated by the table below, Commonwealth revenues have increased by 271% in the same period.

While the manner of calculation of the amounts has changed over that period, revenue as a proportional of GDP has remained much the same. Given the occasional charge against the Howard Government of being the highest-taxing Commonwealth government ever, and the lack of effective rebuttal, such an increase would seem sufficiently accurate. Although the GST is presumably entirely disbursed to the States, they for their part have charged that it is actually less than they were previously receiving under the Grants Commission formulae. It has also been noted that while the Howard Government has regularly indulged in tax cuts, the value of the cuts is less than that accruing to the revenues through bracket creep²¹.

²¹ Taxes giveth as GST taketh away, SMH, 8 July 05

	Receipts			Payments			Cash surplus	
	Per cent real \$m	Per cent growth	Per cent of GDP	Per cent real \$m	Per cent growth	Per cent of GDP	Per cent \$m	Per cent of GDP
1970-71	8,000	5.9	20.9	7,176	10.0	18.7	824	2.1
1971-72	8,827	3.2	20.9	7,987	4.1	18.9	840	2.0
1972-73	9,414	0.4	19.8	9,120	7.5	19.2	294	0.6

1973-74	11,890	10.9	20.7	10,829	4.3	18.9	1,061	1.8
1974-75	15,325	5.5	22.6	15,275	15.5	22.6	50	0.1
1975-76	18,316	3.4	23.0	19,876	12.6	25.0	-1,560	-2.0
1976-77	21,418	4.1	23.4	22,657	1.5	24.7	-1,239	-1.4
1977-78	23,491	0.8	23.4	25,489	3.4	25.4	-1,998	-2.0
1978-79	25,666	3.5	22.7	27,753	3.1	24.6	-2,087	-1.8
1979-80	29,780	5.6	23.1	31,041	1.8	24.1	-1,261	-1.0
1980-81	35,148	6.8	24.1	35,260	2.8	24.2	-112	-0.1
1981-82	40,831	3.1	24.4	40,394	1.7	24.1	437	0.3
1982-83	44,675	-1.9	24.7	47,907	6.4	26.5	-3,232	-1.8
1983-84	49,102	3.2	24.1	55,966	9.7	27.5	-6,864	-3.4
1984-85	57,758	11.6	25.6	63,639	7.9	28.2	-5,881	-2.6
1985-86	64,845	5.7	26.1	69,838	3.3	28.1	-4,993	-2.0

Unreasonable Concessions or Subsidies

In 2002/03, negative gearing deductions on rental properties totalled \$14.9 billion²².

However, this form of deduction has been strongly criticised by, amongst others, the Productivity Commission and the Reserve Bank over concerns they encouraged speculation for tax gains rather than expected rental returns, distorting investment decisions and inflating property prices²³.

²² Nation of landlords lines up for \$15bn tax deduction, SMH, 17 July 2004

²³ ibid

In the 2004/5 financial year, the Government transferred \$4.6 billion from the Consolidated Revenue Fund to the Telstra and Australia Post superannuation funds, as a payout of the existing liability of the government. Although treated as a financing transaction that accordingly had no accounting impact on the Budget surplus²⁴, it was nevertheless a voluntary removal of a great deal of money.

Commonwealth Budget Papers expected that the 2005-06 Budget would have an underlying cash surplus of \$8.9 billion. It further proclaimed "All taxpayers will benefit from a further \$21.7 billion in tax cuts over the next four years."²⁵

The Treasury's pre-election economic and fiscal outlook, suggested that the 2005/6 surplus would reach \$5.3 billion -- more than double the budget forecast of \$2.4 billion. It is also expected that Budget surpluses during the next four years will soar to over \$25 billion²⁶.

Infrastructure bonds are still being traded despite the Government axing the scheme in 1997 (within twelve months of establishing it) because of widespread abuse. By 2007-08, the scheme will have delivered more than \$656 million in tax relief for investors who backed low-risk, high tax-relief projects such as the Sydney Harbour Tunnel and Melbourne's CityLink tollroad. An informed source, Dr Goldberg was quoted as saying that projects such as the CityLink and M2 toll road would not be commercially viable without government subsidies - "Exploitation of the tax system is clearly necessary to compensate for the intrinsic deficiency of revenue available from toll collections,"²⁷.

After a long delay, the Howard Government is now spending \$208 million on an 800-bed concentration camp (currently described as a "permanent immigration detention centre") on Christmas Island. It is of course clearly intended to make both escape and protest impracticable.

Those few limited examples clearly show the enormous resources easily available to the Howard Government should it choose to use them. Its' refusal to properly fund the ABC is therefore a deliberate choice.

Resource Constraints

Many items of evidence have surfaced to demonstrate how the whole and the various parts of the ABC are suffering funding pressures.

News and Current Affairs content has increased from 15% to 20% of total TV broadcast time, and to 50% of Australian-sourced TV content²⁸, undoubtedly because it is cheaper. Little local material is produced in the smaller States apart from state news and sport. Concerts are now seldom broadcast, never on television. Arts and culture coverage as a whole has diminished in both quantity and quality, especially on ABC TV. At the moment there is no Australian-produced (let alone ABC-produced)

²⁴ Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee Hansard, 15 February 2005

²⁵ 2005/6 Budget Overview, AGPS

²⁶ Winner to have extra \$25bn in kitty, The Australian, 11 September 04

²⁷ \$656m tax gift to rich, The Australian, 22 October 2005

²⁸ ABC Annual Report 2004/05, p1

drama on ABC TV (series or otherwise). However, we do have two U.K. cops-and-robbers shows – *Taggart*, and *the Bill*.

Drama, for instance, is a topical issue. For the commercial stations, the general rule of thumb is that an Australian drama needs a national audience of at least 1.1 million to attract sufficient advertising revenue to pay its way.

Amanda Meade summarised the problems well in her article *Cash needed to save ABC's drama*:

“THE ABC will stop producing Australian drama altogether if the federal Government does not increase its triennial funding this year, managing director Russell Balding has warned.

"The ABC is nearing the day when it will not be able to commission any Australian drama at all because of the cost and the funding restraints," Mr Balding said yesterday. "It's a tragedy."

Mr Balding told Media the ABC's local drama output had fallen from a high of 102 hours in 2001 to a historic low of 21 hours in 2004. This year it is estimated the output will be 20 hours, including an MDA telemovie and *The Silence*, a new two-part drama starring Richard Roxburgh, which goes into production in Sydney next month.

Once the leader in the production of innovative and acclaimed Australian drama, including *Blue Murder*, *Certain Women*, *Brides of Christ* and *The Leaving of Liverpool*, the ABC is now lagging behind its commercial counterparts, which produce hundreds of hours of drama every year.

Mr Balding blamed the Howard Government's failure to listen to the ABC's appeal for additional funds to meet rising television production costs in his most recent triennial funding submission. "Back in 2002 I was saying to the Government we've got a problem and that problem is not going away," he said. "We are no longer in the position, and haven't been for some time, to do high-end drama. Long-form drama is gone." Long-form drama includes long-running series such as *GP* and *Police Rescue*, which were very successful for the ABC, but which it can no longer afford to produce.”

An article in *The Age*, *Levy's view from ABC TV's withering heights*, mentions:

"Ms Levy estimates that an hour could cost anywhere from \$500,000 to \$2 million, about 10 to 50 times more than entire series of a studio-based light entertainment program such as *Spicks and Specks*.

"We would do more high-end drama, there's no doubt about it, but a drama telemovie costs \$2.5 million to \$3 million and that's a great deal of money. It costs \$6 million to \$8 million for a miniseries and we just don't have the funds to do that."

After 15 years of requests for more money being rejected by the Federal Government, Ms Levy gives an apocalyptic prognosis for the national broadcaster if it fails to secure a funding increase for the 2006-2008 triennium.

So calamitous is the situation that not only will whole genres of programming be ignored, such as drama and comedy, but entire services

will be axed, she cautions."

In 2003, \$5.4 million was cut by management from the Newscaff budget. It forced *Four Corners* to shorten its season, reduce international reporting, and use more overseas programmes.

Then there is the issue of sports rights. The need for a public broadcaster to serve the public interest was shown by the pressure put on ABC and SBS by the Prime Minister to seek the free-to-air rights for The Ashes earlier this year.

Later this year, whoever wins the rights to cover AFL football from 2007 onwards will have to pay at least \$90 million a year. The ABC has already acknowledged that it now has no significant capacity to compete for prime-time sporting events.

Those with an interest in the high arts need not look for much opera, either. As was noted in *The Australian* ("Aunty baulks at opera fees"),

"THOUSANDS of people will miss out on the classical music event of the year because the ABC says it is too expensive to broadcast.

The epic Adelaide Ring cycle, opening tomorrow, involves 97 opera singers, 129 orchestral musicians, and elaborate special effects.

It is the first Australian production of the four-part operatic marathon, which has cost \$15.3 million to stage, about half of which has been funded by taxpayers.

But the fees of singers and musicians have ruled out a free-to-air broadcast on the national music network, ABC Classic FM.

The station's program manager, John Crawford, said it was disappointing that plans for a broadcast had fallen through.

"The ABC is the appropriate organisation to broadcast it," he said. "(But) the artist fees are so high. There are more musicians working in an opera than any other (musical) ensemble." "

Cumulative Budget reductions mean that the ABC can now afford few TV rights, hence its focus on the less highly-rated sports, as well as the abandonment of TV broadcasts of concerts and the Summer Season of Opera and Ballet. 1996 seems to have been the last of the latter. Nowadays, "Summer Season" refers more to a repeat of some of the more popular productions, and only on Classic FM.

Need for Services

Many statistics can be wheeled out to support the view that the public wants at least as much, if not more, of the ABC's services.

Public commentary can be used as a barometer, in addition to more presumably 'objective' measures. There are the extensive tracts that have been written about the ABC by both supporters and critics. They all take the view that the ABC matters; the dispute is that the ABC does not say enough of what matters to the critics.

Take as an example a minor and non-political change to the sports section of the 7pm news TV bulletin. It generated the following set of articles:

ABC strike looms over sports news
Sports chiefs hopping mad over move to national wrap
ABC sport - but where's the footy?
Angry ABC staff on brink of strike
Bad sports at our ABC [Editorial]
ABC staff strike over sports wrap
ABC staff strike for 24 hours
ABC staff ordered back to work
National strike bid fails
ABC chief lashes out at premiers
ABC staff strike but Sydney sticks to sport script
ABC staff walk out in sport wrap row
Walker weighs into ABC sport row
Govt calls to scrap ABC sports wrap
Give us a sporting chance: ABC
Wilko segment wrong: Costello
Wilko biffed on southern boundary
MPs, sport leaders lash ABC format
Just who was reporting what - and when
Two-minute interview: John Cameron
A fight our city can't afford to lose
Sydney decisions could be wrap's undoing
Media Watch; Sydney Sports :: 22/03/2004
Sydney Sports :: 22/03/2004
Costello labels ABC bad sports
Costello urges ABC to rethink sports wrap
The ABC of a woman scorned
ABC fails to allay Rann's sports concerns
Events guru Ron Walker gets what he wants when he wants it for Victoria
Pippos resists temptation and stays with ABC

The media very obviously saw it as highly newsworthy. It could not have been newsworthy if few people were interested.

Who better to emphasise the unique value of the ABC than Michael Duffy, presenter of Counterpoint, IPA activist and author of the recent ferociously anti-ABC harangue *Greenery is shrouding debate*²⁹:

“The monopoly I have in mind when considering the ABC is its dominant position in what I reluctantly call 'quality broadcasting'. I realise this term is unsatisfactory, not least because the ABC does a number of quite different things for quite different audiences. However, for the purposes of this speech, I'm concerned with the Corporation's dominance of broadcasting to the better-educated, higher income Australians who live mainly in our capital cities. Such people comprise a majority of the Corporation's 15 per cent share of the total broadcasting audience. They like the ABC for its television news and current affairs, children's,

²⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Opinion/Greenery-is-shrouding-debate/2005/03/18/1111086009302.html>

cooking, gardening and British drama programs, and for its genteel chat shows on the radio.

What I am describing, in other words, is broadcasting for the cultured upper-middle classes.

There are other broadcasters aiming for these people, such as Channel 9's Sunday Program and community classical music radio stations. However, compared with the ABC's reach, their audiences are insignificant.³⁰

Counterpoint appears to be professionally run, but consistently biased. Notwithstanding denials by managers, it is an open secret that Michael Duffy was appointed Counterpoint commentator by the Director of Radio to balance a supposed Leftist bias at the ABC – an impression created, really, by the Right itself.

Not surprisingly therefore,

“The director of the Sydney Institute, Gerard Henderson, wrote in the April 2005 Sydney Institute Quarterly about the lack of a plurality of opinion on the ABC, noting that one 55-minute programme on Radio National – ‘Counterpoint’, broadcast on Monday afternoons and repeated on Tuesdays – was being promoted as ‘Radio National’s right wing alternative.’”³¹

While the ABC does have a duty to ensure that a range of views are available, its denial of the above assertion was hardly persuasive given Mr Duffy’s well-known politics.

Non-Budget Funding

WA FABC fully supports the funding requests made by the ABC in its submissions for triennial funding.

Production agreements, distribution agreements, and other commercial linkages with private sector organisations are a necessary part of a ABCs’ operations. While such ABC commercial activities are acceptable, there are others to which we should be strongly opposed, such as:

- licensing use of ABC property to commercial companies to promote their product (e.g. Bananas in Pyjamas to Chiquita);
- ABC endorsement and promotion of commercial company products (e.g. Gardening Australia endorsement on products),
- disguised advertising, and of course
- product placement (whether in ABC productions, or productions made under contract to a ABC), which can be divided into:
 - commercial (clear displays of particular brands or even explicit advertising during the course of a segment), and

³⁰ The ABC of Monopoly and Synergy, A speech for the IPA ABC Conference of 31 March 2001, Michael Duffy

³¹ Communications, Information Technology and the Arts portfolio, ABC Budget Estimates Hearings, 23, 24 and 25 May 2005, Question: 84

- political (funding tied to the provision of particular programmes or services) .
- problems for children from toy-linked television series and movies, including difficulty in distinguishing between programs and commercials, pressure to get a whole series of toys, association with violent cartoon series, toys which do not meet their real play needs, and the pressure to create series that meet toy manufacturer's needs rather than children's.

Some existing commercial arrangements have the potential to get out of hand, e.g. :

- advertising of ABC shop products on TV (with the added concern that these products are not in all instances owned by the ABC.)
- more or more aggressive self-advertising.

Presumably in reaction to pressure to raise revenue, there is a trend toward marketing and corporate staff with a background in commercial marketing, and not public broadcasting, coming into the organisation. That increasing involvement in commercial ventures raises questions about the sufficiency of internal expertise to negotiate business relationships that protect the ABC's integrity, minimize the ABC's risks, and maximize its financial advantage.

ABC management has in the past failed to understand or refused to accept the potential of commercial activities to compromise the broadcaster's independence. The Palmer Inquiry in the 1990s revealed that editorial guidelines on their own are not sufficient to protect ABC programming and editorial content from commercial influence.

In any case, it is all too likely that increasing commercial income will, beyond a certain amount, simply enable the government of the day to reduce funding by a matching amount, thus allowing it to withdraw further from its responsibility.

We absolutely oppose any paid advertising on the ABC. Proper funding of the ABC is a duty of the government of the day.

Commercial Media Mediocrity

Since the middle of the twentieth century Australia has had a concentration of media ownership almost without parallel in liberal democracies. News Ltd dominates the newspaper market with over 75% of metropolitan circulation, competing with Fairfax publications in Sydney and Melbourne and shifting ownership of the *Canberra Times*. A small number of companies control the commercial radio and television networks. In radio particularly there has been a rapid shift to networked programming, especially of news content, and in all media there is an increased concentration of supply of international news from corporate stablemates or syndicates, facilitated by new information technologies³².

All the negative tendencies discussed below have damaged the capacity and the desire of ordinary citizens to participate in our democracy. Criticism is healthy, but cynicism and alienation are not.

Exploitation

Unfortunately, the main operational aim of today's corporate media is to cut costs and maximise income.

Cost cutting limits the capacity of journalists to investigate and report, and maximises the use of syndicated material³³. In radio particularly there has been a rapid shift to networked programming, especially of news content, and in all media there is an increased concentration of supply of international news from corporate stablemates or syndicates, facilitated by new information technologies³⁴.

Maximising income means maximising audience. Away from the hard news and current affairs content areas, it tends to promote the mix of editorial content with advertisements or product promotion—so-called 'advertorial'—which is particularly prevalent in print and television magazine content, and indirectly in the supplements of the metropolitan newspapers³⁵. It also means excluding poorer consumers as part of the treatment of audiences as consumers rather than citizens.

All too often, the result is news written for a twelve-year-old, while with radio or TV good programmes may be dropped because they rate well only with the over-40s³⁶.

Incitement

Both Professor Michael Pusey and Doctor Jones have researched the extent to which the commercial media influence particular social groups. They have found, not surprisingly, that the least socially interested groups tend to pay most attention to the poorest quality media, namely commercial TV and the shock-jocks.

As Dr Jones observed:

³² Freedom of the Press in Australia, Chris Nash, 2003

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Going public in New Zealand, Media Report, ABC, 6 June 2002

“It is plausible to propose then, that there is an inverse relation between informed opinion amongst the Australian citizenry and the Australian commercial media’s incapacity, especially in the form of television news, to realize the goal of informed citizenship³⁷.”

Just as relevantly, the ABA noted in a report³⁸:

When asked “how easy is it . . . to tell the difference between facts and opinions in news and current affairs,” 41 per cent (Table 3) indicated it was “not very easy” with another 21 per cent saying it was “not at all easy.”

.....

Participants indicated that they found it very difficult at times to judge the accuracy of news and current affairs. Importantly, participants noticed retractions in the newspaper (indicating that errors had occurred) but said they rarely saw retractions on television programs. Again, television news and current affairs were indicted most with participants saying television was the worst offender because it could show any type of photos and these would not necessarily be accurate.

Shock-jocks are of course labelled as such specifically because of their incitement of aggressive intolerance. The American talk radio industry has recently been criticised for its frequent use of inflammatory language and aggressive rhetoric, especially with regard to the Arab and Muslim world³⁹. As in Australia, conservatives are a willing audience.

However, a recent “grovelling” apology issued by Laws to the gay community did show the effectiveness of a concerted campaign. In the fortnight between his anti-gay broadcast and the apology, gays wrote to 2UE, Laws' sponsors (including Toyota, Qantas and Telstra), Communications Minister Coonan and other politicians, as well as boycotting a restaurant co-owned by Laws⁴⁰.

Bias

Less attention has been paid to the political biases of the commercial media than the supposed bias of the ABC. However, the commercial media is widely assumed to be biased, usually in favour of wealthy private interests rather than the interests of ordinary people on ordinary incomes.

An anti-Green campaign by the Murdoch Melbourne tabloid, the *Herald Sun*, had a damaging impact on the Greens at the time of the last Federal election.

On August 31 last year, five weeks before the Federal election, the *Herald Sun* published a story from its Canberra bureau headlined, "Greens back illegal drugs", with two subheads, "Open door plan for all refugees" and "Family home tax, gay marriage nod". The headline later appeared extensively in Government advertising.

³⁷ Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Broadcasting Legislation, Dr Paul Jones, July 1999

³⁸ www.aba.gov.au/tv/research/projects/sources/stage2/pdf/aud_411.pdf

³⁹ Freedom of the airwaves or hate radio?, *al-Jazeera*, 03 June 2004

⁴⁰ Laws: I'm sorry for my queer speech, *The Australian*, 19 November 04

It reappeared in Liberal Party advertising in the 2004 West Australian state election. Bob Brown takes the view that it cost the Greens hundreds of thousands of votes.

Bob Brown made a complaint to the APC, which was upheld, both initially and on appeal. All that the *Herald Sun* was obliged to do was to publish an acknowledgement of its error; however, it refused even to do that. Current print media self-regulation arrangements do not permit any other less insignificant and less ineffective recourse.

Misrepresentation

Journalists have a reputation for distorting and oversimplifying the matters that they report.

If, for instance, their producer wants a story along the lines of “pictures of skinny models are making teenage girls anorexic”, the journalist will go looking for an academic or other apparently authority to give a few lines to that effect. The programme will not report the truth that while popular culture certainly has a strong influence in teenage girls’ lives, it is much more complex than that suggested by such a simplistic claim.

Society cannot hope to have a debate to resolve issues – especially the most important – while such ignorant views control the media. Society has contained that commercial mediocrity by creating public-service broadcasters, essentially ABC and SBS.

Spin (the art of media propaganda), and self-censorship (those producing a media item ensure that it conforms to the official conservatism - the world view of the Hard Right) are other frequent products.

Medals for Media Mediocrity

A contrast between the recent Commercial Media Awards and the Walkleys is extremely unflattering to the commercial media.

Alan Jones (2GB) was deemed the best talk presenter and best current affairs commentator for the third consecutive year. That, notwithstanding his very recent defamation of John Coates⁴¹. Or that only in March, the Independent Commission Against Corruption was considering contempt action against him for criticising a witness in the Orange Grove factory outlet investigation⁴². Or *Media Watch*’s assertion – which he did not deny - that his promotion of the drug Ebixa might have been funded by Lundbeck Australia⁴³.

Bob Francis (5AA) was inducted into the Commercial Radio Hall of Fame. Pity that the Australian Broadcasting Authority had found that Francis had breached commercial radio codes of practice by broadcasting in 2004 a programme likely to have incited or perpetuated hatred against or vilified Aboriginal people on the basis of

⁴¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200510/s1476422.htm>

⁴² Alan Jones escapes contempt action, *The Age*, 10 March 05

⁴³ <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s926889.htm>

their race⁴⁴. Or that after the first Bali bombing, he said of a Muslim caller, "I wouldn't kill this person because of his religion, I wanna kill him because of his thoughts."⁴⁵

Ray Hadley (2GB) won the best sports presenter award for the second year running. In March, he also abused Alexander Downer (possibly a point in his favour) and listeners who complained about his repeated playing of a track that Media Watch reported was ended by a nursery song sung by Hadley's daughter⁴⁶. As with Alan Jones, only in March, the Independent Commission Against Corruption briefly considered contempt action against him for criticising a witness in the Orange Grove factory outlet investigation⁴⁷. As is no doubt a necessity for any true shock jock, Ray Hadley was found in early 2004 to have broadcast assertions about a skydiver that a jury could reasonably find to be defamatory⁴⁸.

Walkeley Awards, in contrast, favour the ABC. All the ten radio finalists for the 50th Walkleys are from the ABC. For television, over a number of categories, the ABC has 21 finalists, SBS has 2, Channel 7 has 1, Channel 9 has 1, and Channel 10 has none.

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⁴⁴ <http://news.sbs.com.au/livingblack/index.php?action=news&id=113856>

⁴⁵ http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/211002_s11.htm

⁴⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1353007.htm>

⁴⁷ No action against 2GB's Hadley, SMH, 12 March 2005

⁴⁸ DENT v MACQUARIE RADIO NETWORK PTY LTD [2004] NSWSC 95 (27 February 2004)

[Cataloguing and Preservation]

No index or compendium or cross-reference system is available for material produced on the ABC, even though it generates a good deal of very useful and often unique material.

Google searches or the ABC search arrangement is usually quite unsuccessful in locating items of interest. However, the former does allow a search to be limited by website and date of posting. After all, any search term using "ABC" or "2005" will bring up everything, since the ABC's own search arrangement doesn't seem able to successfully handle Boolean searches.

Search engines are likely to have problems handling items with alternative spellings - when Lawrence of Arabia sent his manuscript to be typeset, it was pointed out that a man whose name began as Sherif Abd el Mayin later became el Main, el Mayein, el Muein, el Mayin and le Muyein.

A proper index would give the proper cross-references in such situations. But it requires staff with appropriate skills, who actually do need to be properly paid for their work.

Transcripts should ideally be available for all the Radio National programmes. Although podcasts are now available for *Late Night Live*, no transcripts are kept - a situation partially compensated by the apparent cessation of transcription of *Counterpoint*.

Nor should the proper retention of archive material be ignored. As is well known, only 23 of the 5,780 episodes of *Blue Hills* are still available on tape (although all the scripts were preserved). Many of the tapes were used to record something else - a gem of cost-efficiency and economic rationalism.

My Word, *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Dad's Army* and *The Goons* would not be worth preserving by post-modernist standards, but their recent deleting from Radio National causing sufficient public pressure for them to be restored to broadcast.

A 1997 investigation of the Senate Communications committee (which included Senator Coonan as a member) was advised that the ABC kept media of only 30% of its own productions, an uncertain amount regarding contracted productions, and that it cost ten times as much to index material as it did to scan it. Archivists will naturally expect to be properly remunerated for their efforts.