

Beyond Antique Roadshow: Help us to counter Rupert Murdoch's plan to destroy public broadcasting in Australia.

Quentin Dempster - 31 October 2015

Address by Quentin Dempster to the Ryde-Macquarie Teachers' Association Annual Dinner - Ryde-Eastwood Leagues Club 30 October 2015.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's great to be with you.

I acknowledge we meet on Aboriginal land.

Always was.....

Always will be.

I regret to report there are forces at work in this country out to destroy public broadcasting... the ABC and SBS.

But the fight to protect and enhance a more dynamic public broadcasting sector has just begun.

Tomorrow in The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald, you will see a half page ad paid for by public broadcasting supporters calling on all Australians to join the Friends of the ABC or Save Our SBS - grass roots audience-focused organisations - to stake a claim on this country's future as an informed, engaged and cohesive polity. A more professional national campaign organisation has been revitalised with branches in all states. I ask all in this room - and particularly the teachers and parents of Australia beyond this room - to help build our fighting fund and to join the membership drive. We need people power to counter the forces out to undermine and destroy the tangible and intangible benefits to be derived from quality journalism and program making - from news and current affairs, specialisations in science, health, education, climate change, the environment, economics and international affairs, law, media and justice; documentary, satire, drama, curriculum-specific educational programming, music - contemporary, symphonic, jazz, opera, the performing arts, rural and regional engagement, multi-lingual radio and television broadcasting in our now polyglot Australia, entertainment and sport.

The media industry is now in the disruptive grip of what we call the digital revolution.

I don't know about you and .. don't get me wrong ... I love Stephen Fry , QI and Antique Roadshow across the village greens of Merry England .. but this is bloody Australia. We're standing in it! How many more of these relentless repeats of other broadcasters' catalogue and comparatively cheap off-the-shelf shows do we have to endure on the ABC? Under funding attack the ABC has retreated to its Ultimo bunker. The ABC IS Sydney-centric with more than half the staff working there. TV production in Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland has been eliminated. The ABC does not have an in house documentary or natural history unit. The ABC co-produces its declining drama slate with commercial producers on ideas often prioritised as 'bankable' for on sale to Foxtel and other cable services. This business model necessarily limits innovative drama.

Next year a tranche of ABC regional radio programs through the morning across Australia will go. Hard pressed so called breakfast presenters will be hoarse after more than three hours at the microphone as 'breakfast' extends well into the day.

As well there's the existential threat from the digital revolution. There are now many online players, over-the-top video streamers from off shore, now with direct access through wi fi to eventually all Australian households. They do not make any content locally and many use tax havens to avoid paying fair tax on revenues derived from Australian consumers. The entire Australian creative content industry is now fighting

for its viability under this threat from the global aggregators. So the disruption does not just affect the public broadcasters.

Without a strong political support base, the public broadcasters are in grave danger. These institutions - the ABC with an 83 year legacy; SBS with 36 years, have legislated Charters requiring all program makers to regard their audiences as citizens in a robust democracy .. and not consumers to be delivered up to advertisers. Programs should be commissioned on the basis of their creative merit, sometimes with risk. On-air conversations should facilitate the clash of ideas, not be devised by agents provocateur , radio shock jocks or Murdoch Press ranters for political propaganda. Interviews should interrogate both the information available and the advocate or mouthpiece. This requires experience, skill, and lots of preparatory research.

While the laws establishing the ABC, SBS and NITV may remain, the lever of 'control' applied by government, is, as always, in the adequacy of resources directed through triennial funding appropriations. And there's the discretionary power of executive government. It is this lever which urges like the Murdoch Press work on, here in Australia, in the United Kingdom with the BBC and in the United States through that country's now marginalised PBS broadcaster. It is the reason the ABC in Australia has been vilified as 'left wing', out of control, wasteful and unaccountable in a barrage of beat-ups and contrived scandals. It is the reason the BBC in the United Kingdom has been shrunk with funding stasis implemented by a hostile Cameron Government. It is the reason PBS in the United States has to try to supplement its funding through 'pledge plea' telethons - something the Murdoch Press now wants replicated for ABC funding in Australia.

In his recent play, *Rupert*, the great Australian playwright David Williamson had the actor playing the older Rupert Murdoch confront the audience in the last scene. After a clever exposition of Murdoch's lifetime of acquisition audacity, his aggressive intimidation of the politicians in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, his unethical practices like phone hacking and his Fox News propagandising for the Republican Party in the U.S. and his newspapers' shameless front page barracking for Tony Abbott more recently in Australia... David Williamson had the actor playing Murdoch eye-ball the audience with words to the effect: "I'm still here .. what are you going to do about it?"

Although - now - the demise of Tony Abbott as prime minister has mitigated the fear many of us felt over two years of hostility ... we are yet to see Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's professed regard for the public broadcasters turned into supportive action. (I made a mistake in my political judgement last year when I said I believed Malcolm would never become the PM. I thought if Tony faltered, Rupert would swing his support behind Julie Bishop or Scott Morrison. But more than six months after his near-death experience this year, Abbott remained vulnerable and Malcolm seized the moment and the numbers in a very nervous party room to eclipse Tony. So it appears that Malcolm Turnbull has attained the prime ministership without the support of the kingmaker ... Rupert Murdoch. We will have to wait for the published memoirs to learn how Malcolm persuaded Scott Morrison and Julie Bishop not to split the vote by throwing their hats in the ring in the latest leadership ballot).

We know all about the concept of Cabinet solidarity. Malcolm was not a member of the Abbott Government's Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) which dishonoured Abbott's now infamous pre-election commitment that there would be no cuts to the ABC or SBS .. no cuts to health and no cuts to education. (I'll get back to education shortly).

But the record shows Malcolm Turnbull tap danced around, defended and compounded Tony Abbott's lie. He sooled a commercial TV network executive, Peter Lewis, on to both ABC and SBS in what was called an 'efficiency review' with the implication that the broadcasters must be wasting taxpayers' money. (Lewis has now been appointed to the board of the ABC). Turnbull tried to indicate that the reduction in base funding ordered by the ERC over three years was manageable and should not impact on either broadcasters' programming. He was mute when his Cabinet colleague, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, unilaterally terminated the ABC DFAT contract, bringing to an end the Australia Network and its active engagement with the region through its many in situ correspondents ... and the reduction of Radio Australia to no more than rip and read. The loss of these resources has vandalised Australia's national interest in the Asia Pacific

region. The vacuum of influence created by Australia's withdrawal is now being filled by China... and New Zealand.

We all live in hope and I can accept that many Australians want to cut Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull some slack while he soothes the hard right of his party room, compromises with the Nationals, and tries to reshape the government in his own image .. not Tony Abbott's image. I'm sure every Australian of goodwill is hoping that now the ambitious Mr Turnbull has attained the top job he will be a unifying and intelligent facilitator and leader of the the nation as we confront our problems: environmental sustainability, the budget deficit, more effective counter-terrorism measures and the infrastructure backlog in a country still on track to rapidly increase its population to 40 million by 2055. The Prime Minister promises us a smart, intelligent, inclusive culture full of start-up innovation and entrepreneurship, presumably with an education system embedding his friend David Gonski's recurrent funding formula to over-come educational disadvantage which has been proven to exist.

The Gonski model will only be entrenched in recurrent funding beyond 2017, it now appears, through an increase in the goods and services tax to 15 percent. This is now on the political agenda. I, for one, think it must happen with appropriate offsets. Where do you stand on this? With a rapidly growing population this country's revenue base has to be increased and diversified, not just to drive us back to budget balance. Dr Ken Henry has clearly indicated that current revenue and expenditure settings are unsustainable given the two party determination to drive population growth to pile on consumer market demand.

As well Malcolm Turnbull and his new Communications Minister Mitch Fifield look like moving to reform media policy in Australia by eliminating what's known as the 'reach' rule and/or the 'two out of three rule', allowing print, radio and television ownership to be consolidated across all capital city and regional markets. These rules are now considered redundant because of video and audio streaming now accessible to worldwide players.

The need to join the Friends of the ABC and/or Save Our SBS is now more urgent if there is an early double dissolution federal election. My Canberra spies tell me that if the current primary vote honeymoon now being enjoyed by the Coalition in response to Turnbull's ascension to the prime ministership continues into next year, the PM and Tony Nutt, the new federal director of the Liberal Party, will be unable to resist exploiting this political advantage to deliver a Mal-slide - an electoral land slide, not only to defend the current 22 seat parliamentary majority but to increase it in the face of a faltering Bill Shorten Labor Party. March could be the preferred timing. The PM will have to be deft in his footwork, making sure there are no political gaffes which leave him exposed. Otherwise the election will occur later .. back to schedule after September ... rather than sooner.

Let's watch and see how Rupert Murdoch plays this out. His organs and ranters appear somewhat confused at the moment.

The Australian Labor Party has not always been a friend of public broadcasting in the past - particularly during the Hawke and Keating eras when funding was progressively cut and the ABC was taken up the dry gulch of pay television and sponsored international services.

I give appropriate credit now to then federal treasurer Wayne Swan in the Rudd and Gillard governments. Under his ERC there was a modest enhancement for the ABC and the rescue of SBS from insolvency. Both broadcasters were able to restructure their services to lead the way in the transformation to digital services. The ABC had been reborn through cost effectively using the multi-platform, multi-channel technology. But when the next wave of political hostility came last year with the Abbott Government's dishonouring of that election commitment, the broadcaster was faced with what managing director Mark Scott said was a choice between servicing older audiences accessing traditional radio and television media, and new younger audiences accessing the ABC through iPad and iphones and online. With an ageing population we should be doing both, but the MD and the ABC Board believed that if the ABC was to survive to its 100th birthday in 2032 it needed to get with youth and technology.

For SBS a hostile SBS Board has allowed the commercial compromise of its Charter through allowing the disruption of programs by ads .. not between programs, but within them. And this year the SBS Board, backed by Malcolm Turnbull as communications ministers, tried to amend the SBS Act to effectively double the ads in prime time from five to 10 minutes. SBS will now start a shopping channel .. an advertorial channel .. with a commercial programmer and its own catalogue of cooking shows to enhance its advertising revenues. Over time this will destroy SBS and its raison d'être. SBS was established by the Malcolm Fraser Government in 1979 to serve the needs of the non-English speaking population in languages of their countries of origin. The ABC was rightly seen as deficient in this area. In an age of geo-political tension, drone and jihadi terror, if ever a taxpayer investment in counter-terrorism was justified - the \$270million we spend on SBS is more than justified. Incoming migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds including this country's 600,000 Muslims, need to feel included and listened to, not alienated by Murdoch Press rantings or dog whistling prejudice, racism and xenophobia.

In his recent book Rules of Engagement former News Corp chief executive Kim Williams offered a critique of the ABC with which I found myself agreeing. As a Friend of the ABC you are entitled to your two bob's worth. We all own it, as Williams rightly points out.

He writes: The ABC is capable of as much vainglorious behaviour as our commercial media and is often consumed in a fountain of self-congratulatory rhetoric about itself and its centrality to independent views and reportage on Australia. P 223.

We all need to be constructively critical of the ABC. Williams says the ABC refused to acknowledge just how slight the ABC's comparative output against other TV media has become in quantity, particularly drama. I don't remember seeing Kim at the political barricades as we fought for adequate program funding for the ABC over the last 20 or so years. But his observation rings true. "Its television work in documentary and the arts is uneven and frankly quite slight, and both are areas which are almost exclusively the responsibility of ABC TV and it needs to nurture and care about that territory more than others.

I agree with him. To wear the mantle of the national broadcaster the ABC needs to dramatically lift its game in documentary and the arts across all platforms. Williams says ABC documentary has become cheap and basic populist fare, a discount copy of many commercial reality shows. ABC TV does not reflect a diversity of views about our society.

He suggests: " I am reluctant to advocate separating ABC radio and television to create smaller more focussed organisations, but something is needed to revitalise the institutional framework that reinforces the ABC's strength in aspects of radio and enables television to address its areas of weakness with continued attention to allied digital development".

Now that Kim Williams is free from the persecutions of those ingrates, his former fellow News Corp. executives, perhaps we can expect him now to join the Friends of the ABC and Save Our SBS to add to the constructive criticism and political advocacy to improve ABC and SBS performance ... and funding.

Ladies and gentlemen, unless this country is to be surrendered to the dogmatic simplicities, intimidations and manipulations of the Murdoch Press we need all concerned Australians to support and constructively criticise the ABC .. and SBS.

There are big political battles to be fought over the education of our children ... and the future of our democracy and our media, the public broadcasters in particular, through the digital revolution.,

The ABC and SBS need Friends and Saviours.

Please help!
Thank you.