

A CALL TO ARMS –Why this Country needs you to act.

(Ranald Macdonald's address to the ABC Friends NSW & ACT Annual General Meeting – Sydney - 26 Sep 2015)

The latest figures show over 400 ABC staff already “removed” from the ABC, as we edge towards its 500 target.

The recent change in Prime Ministership has NOT changed expectations at the ABC or at SBS. The situation continues to be dire. I will try and explain why.

It is terrific to see so many of you here to this Annual General Meeting of Friends of our ABC.

It is a good word ‘friends’ because it means that in times of need – and let me emphasize that is NOW – by definition we are there for the ABC, to defend it against the naysayers, to support it in every way we can and if necessary to go to the barricades for it.

And, can I suggest, we may well need to go to the barricades to ensure our public broadcaster can do its job.

If you read the papers, all is happiness and light with the new PM, who just happens to be the former Communications Minister who announced the \$270 million cuts, played the heavy with both board and staff of the ABC – and was part of Cabinet which approved the capricious decision of Julie Bishop to terminate the DFAT contract with the Australia Network.

In the words of outstanding journalist and commentator Quentin Dempster, that decision “vandalized the ABC’s international reporting capacity” and has decimated Radio Australia.

Which leads us to the positive role, we as Friends, can claim – and that is the right to demand that the ABC does better. We try to ensure that it fulfils its charter for all of Australia and provides us with the quality and range of programing we expect of it.

As the wonderful John Clarke advised me, do not let the Friends be portrayed as WMDs - that is, Well Meaning Dills who just say everything the ABC does is great.

I am sure everyone in this room have felt like throwing his or her shoes at the TV set or have actually turned off the radio when irritated by crass or rude questioning, or by the lack of quality of a program.

The ABC is by no means perfect, it has become too Sydney-centric and lacking in depth and interpretation of overseas news stories. Some of its most popular productions have been truncated – though there are financial reasons for all this.

Yet, this country needs our ABC, we need a strong and independent Australian voice – and decision makers need to be held to account by a properly sourced broadcaster.

The ABC is under charter to provide quality programs across the full range of the news local and (let me emphasize) INTERNATIONAL, to cover the arts, provide original Australian productions promoting Australian talent, documentaries, children’s programming and sport. Rural and regional communities need the ABC’s involvement desperately – and they cannot be directed from Sydney or Melbourne without local involvement.

Forget the annoyances, though, and think of the quality and range of what the ABC still offers us all – and at 13/14 cents a day.

Further, imagine the impact on our democracy – of the quality of public debate - if Murdoch further rules the waves through a weakened and uncompetitive ABC and a truncated SBS.

When I asked Ron Tandberg to draw us a cartoon, he came up with the concept front-paged on your excellent UPDATE newsletter and on the ABC Friends web sites around Australia, which I called The Forces of Evil.

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Those forces he drew breaking into an ABC viewer's home (and which seek to destroy our public broadcaster) come from many directions.

From inside the ABC tent (why would the Managing Director have to have foisted on him as a board member looking over his shoulder the person who did the government's work in identifying "efficiency" dividends i.e. cuts to funds to satisfy the demands of the Abbot Government?), or from some formerly inside the tent (i.e. Chairman Maurice Newman, who now berates the ABC through the welcoming columns of The Australian), and from those who ideologically or for commercial and competitive reasons want to weaken, or achieve death by a thousand cuts, of both the ABC and SBS.

These forces – and it is not just Mr. Murdoch and his Rottweilers – though he and they lead the anti-public broadcasting pack both here and in the UK and in the United States.....These forces try to persuade the communities they do NOT need public broadcasting – private enterprise and the web and new media will do the job.

Let me read an excellent OPEN LETTER from the Friends to our new PM.

"We ask that some of the decisions about ABC matters made at Cabinet over the last year and more be reviewed. They do not sit well with the views expressed by yourself in previous years when you made clear how much you value our National Broadcaster.

They do not sit well with the Malcolm Turnbull who launched the Parliamentary Friends of the ABC.

The do not sit well with your previously expressed high praise for the ABC.

We would ask that the following specific proposals be considered.

Appoint a more balanced Nominations Committee to recommend appointments to the ABC and SBS Boards – recent appointees suggest the Government is preparing for privatization.

Ensure that Managing Director Mark Scott's replacement, and the appointment process is absolutely apolitical and wholly transparent.

Restore ABC funding to pre-Abbot Government levels and lock in the next triennial funding cycle at least to those levels.

Restore the DFAT/ABC contract to run the Australia Network Television – the ABC's overseas service.

Take particular steps to restore the ABC's rural and regional network – we note the importance of this for the National Party, for rural MPs and for our communities."

Incidentally the advertisement for Mark Scott's replacement as CEO of the ABC is now out and incorporates the following:

"Operating under Government Charter the corporation has a unique role in informing, educating and connecting all Australians."

Also – *"Will have responsibility for ensuring ABC's success in augmenting and reinforcing a sense of Australian culture and identity."*

(It does not refer to international news coverage, perhaps because the loss of its Australia Network early into its 10-year contract has been so devastating)

The Conservative Party Culture Secretary in Britain stated that the BBC should be *"narrower and more focused"*.

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News Corp Australian CEO Julian Clarke echoed his boss's views here with an 'exclusive' interview in The Australian in which he asked, "Why should the ABC push into new media spaces?"

Murdoch loyalist and columnist and ABC hater, Chris Kenny, wrote recently; *"The ABC needs to allocate its resources more effectively, in keeping with its charter obligations, to the regions, and with less emphasis on Scott's passion to expend into every available digital platform".*

Comment – it is hard to fulfill the charter requirements if the resources given it are inadequate. Further, to opt out of digital and other technologies available to the broadcaster to properly compete will ensure slow and lingering death,

The conservative newspaper, the UK's Daily Telegraph, in a recent editorial criticizing the BBC Director General's speech said that *"The simple and better answer, for the BBC to reduce its activities in areas where the private sector can provide, was apparently not even considered by the corporation's numerous and well paid executives...."*

Both Murdoch's senior and junior – Rupert and James – in their recent MacTaggart Media lectures in Edinburgh have made their positions very clear about leaving the new media outlets to private enterprise and opining that public broadcasting sticks to its traditional television and radio operations.

They use weasel words.

They mean, just leave the new media to us and we can make more money and have greater power – that is their clear agenda. Weakening public broadcasting or even sentencing it to a slow death by not allowing it to compete effectively would make life easier for the competitors.

At least – though James Murdoch went close – they don't publicly echo the Institute of Public Affairs position put to the Abbott government that we do not need public broadcasting in Australia.

THAT the ABC should be privatized.

So why do Australians need a strong ABC and SBS?

To quote the excellent Quentin Dempster again:

"The ABC and SBS contribute to local content production under their respective Charters but always within the constraints of funding allocated by the federal cabinet's expenditure review committee.

The most recent down-sizing of the ABC and SBS have seen the loss of programming and mass sacking of content creators as both were forced to reshape their operations. The ABC lost local current affairs specialization in Radio National, live broadcasts on Classic FM and regional TV production. With Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's unilateral termination of the DFAT Australia Network contract the ABC's network of in situ correspondents, which had helped to make ABC international coverage so distinctive, were decimated. Radio Australia was reduced to 'rip and read'.

To secure the sustainable survival of the ABC and SBS, their raison d'être needs to be restated. Public broadcasters view their audiences as citizens in a robust democracy and not as consumers to be delivered up to advertisers. Creative independence through a critical mass of program makers with a capacity to commission and make the full genre of programs based on the clash of ideas is vital for the AABC's continued relevance. Although the digital revolution has enabled the ABC to cost-effectively extend its reach of younger audiences, its other Charter

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purposes (localism, international coverage, regional production, specialization) are being wilfully neglected.

For SBS the raison d'être is clear. In an era of geo political tension, drone, jihadi and lone wolf terror, a new polyglot Australia needs a broadcaster committed to build understanding, break down insularity, xenophobia and bigotry. The taxpayer investment in SBS's multi-lingual radio, GTV and online services should be seen as a counter to both terrorism and ethnic isolation. The prize: a more informed, inclusive and cohesive polity.

These are the intangible benefits of Australia's unique mainstream public broadcasting system."

To return to the Friends' letter to our new PM, the challenges for public broadcasting – for its survival - are out there for all to see.

So, please continue to support the Friends Nationally in its work to ensure a better, more independent, and more competitive ABC.

We are not WMD's (Weapons of Mass Destruction) – as like each of you, we retain the right to criticise as and when needed, BUT as committed Friends and supporters of public broadcasting.

We are in the process of building membership nationally, of introducing a new category of ABC Supporters (who give but do not wish to be members as such) and we are developing a Fighting Fund to pay for getting the message across that we Must Not let the ABC be weakened or compromised.

The Forces of Evil will not go away – and the change in PM where the Communications Minister is now PM will be unlikely to see a significant change in policy. Active protest, pressure and debate can achieve remarkable things in a democracy – so please all do what you can as groups and individually.

We hope for the best and will see what happens to repair the damage, but it is hard to see a reversal by this Government of the Australia Network decision, nor of the cuts, nor of the imbalance of the nomination committee for the board, and we await with concern who Prime Minister Turnbull gets as the new CEO of the ABC.

Also, despite the soothing words of the new Communications Minister, who in a “frisky” moment (but in a prepared speech) said there was merit in the idea of privatising the ABC, the Government will be judged by what he and the former Communications Minister actually do to allow the ABC and SBS to compete and serve Australians to the best of their abilities.

While the jury ruminates – let us work to all build the strength of ABC Friends by inviting new members and Supporters (a fresh category for those who back us but do not want to join) and by Donating to our National Fighting Fund.

Sadly, I can confidently predict that we will be drawing on the Fighting fund to protect our national broadcasters. And we need to persuade the Labor Party to really commit to supporting both the ABC and SBS. (Its draft platform encouragingly says it will “increase funding” but we need cast iron guarantees.)

So, we as Friends seek – Australia needs - your continual backing and active recruitment to the cause.