



February, 2016

The following submission is presented to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communication following reference to it of the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment \(Rural and Regional Agency\) Bill 2015](#) on behalf of ABC Friends nationally.

‘ABC Friends’ is a loose knit federation of State and Territory groups of members and supporters numbering tens of thousands who believe in the need for the continuing existence, and the protection of the values of, a robust, properly-funded and independent Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (*Addendum 1*)

We believe fervently that the continuing presence of our national broadcaster providing quality programs for all Australians is basic to our democratic structure. (*Addendum 2*)

First, though, we wish to record our continuing concern over the cut in funding and the capricious decision by DFAT to end the ABC’s Australia Network contract one year into its newly-awarded 10-year contract.

The detrimental impact of both decisions is clear for all to see, and has direct bearing on this Senate Committee Inquiry into the ABC’s regional coverage and linkages to the community and of the ABC’s ability to fulfil its Charter requirements.

The cuts have resulted for both television and radio in more program repeats, cheap imports and – of serious concern – the growing Sydney-centralism of the ABC’s operations and decision-making.

The depth, range and standard of programming have already been badly affected – though to the casual observer, perhaps, the full impact on both radio and television program quality has not been fully understood. The ABC programmers and staff have done well to ‘paper over the cracks’ by shortening runs, incorporating greater numbers of repeats, and with the increased use of overseas material in all areas – including children’s television, and television and radio news reporting and documentaries.

As the ABC submission in February to the House Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts states, its performance should be assessed in light of the fact that it had to “balance its charter obligations” with the reduced funding level available to it.

Before listing the points we as Friends wish to make - and our major recommendation - we reiterate that we represent many thousands of members and supporters right around Australia and beyond our boundaries. We see our role as genuine ‘friends’ of the ABC – and that means support in time of crisis, which is now, and yet feeling an obligation to suggest where the Corporation could, and should, be doing better.

In summary:

- a We list at the end of this submission a proposed change in wording of the ABC Corporation Charter preamble, which would remove many of the concerns of rural and provincial Australia about being disenfranchised.
- b We recommend that the responsibility is placed squarely on the Board and the Management to fulfill the statutory requirements on the organisation's operations so that the ABC meets its Charter obligations. We believe it essential that the ABC remains free of governmental interference.
- c We recognize the changes in technology which have already occurred and the impact they have already had (and will in the future have) on the way the ABC prepares, produces, delivers and structures its operations. However, we do not believe that any savings/'efficiencies' achieved should result in reduced funding levels, but instead that any extra resources should be invested in programming range and quality to provide better services for all of Australia – and enable it to fully meet the Charter requirements.
- d Further, the loss of nearly 500 jobs and the impact of the Australia Network removal have already taken a toll on the depth of coverage, on the ABC's ability to investigate and research and allocate the necessary resources for presenting our Australian voice to our Northern neighbours. The determinations have also impacted on the ability of the ABC to provide informed coverage back to Australia on issues important to this country in understanding the complexities and relevance of international news and events.
- e The ABC has a proud record in nurturing and showcasing Australian talent and creativity over more than 80 years. It is the Friends' view that this record is severely undermined by the cuts and the loss of staff AND the Sydney-centralism of the Corporations activities. The Charter requires the whole of Australia to benefit and be part of the ABC – and opportunities for Australian talent to develop should not be limited just to NSW and, to a lesser extent, Victoria. In both radio and television, the rural and provincial centres have been amongst the hardest hit – though the impact on the foreign news coverage also rates highly. The major metropolitan cities outside of Sydney have to a large extent been bypassed and marginalised. (A statistical analysis of ABC employees and where they are based is attached and is instructive - *Addendum 3*)
- f There are promises of more original Australian drama (note from ABC Director of Programming – *Addendum 4*), but more information is needed on how programs will be produced and in what parts of the country AND where the financing will come from. All viewers will have noticed the number of repeats, the cheap imported programs and the use of foreign (non-Australian)

correspondents when our thinning ranks of reporters cannot be flown from their ‘hubs’ to cover major news events. (Not to mention the relentless Antiques Roadshows and Stephen Fry’s domination of our screens). The percentage of Australian material in the vital area for the ABC of children’s programming is very low.

- g We do NOT agree with the recently advocated concept of two ABCs – regional and metropolitan – as it would be unwieldy, costly and also require more investment in management. Further, we do not agree with specific mandated targets, reports, number of regional programs to ensure rural and provincial quotas as we think that the issue is simply resolved by an improved Charter and by the requirement for the ABC Board and Management without Governmental interference to fulfil, in the interests of all Australians, what is actually set down in that Charter.
- h As to the make-up of the ABC Board, it must, we believe, be diverse and independent of governmental influence. To require a specific number to be ‘rural-based’ would not necessarily achieve a better outcome. Perhaps a more valuable objective would be the selection of a board member with a refugee background, or one having experience in broadcasting programming creation, being from a major organization with linkages into the rural community, or having a strong record in social work, or has been successful in business, or has an artistic background.
- i Of absolute importance – which the recently changed board nomination procedures were meant to ensure – is that the best group of people, with differing backgrounds from around Australia, are nominated for the Board. And, that those appointed, who are charged with independent leadership, must be free of political ties so they can act without fear or favour in the interests of Australians generally.

Now, to our specific recommendation:

THAT the ABC Charter be re-worded, with a few simple changes to section (1), so that it reads as follows.

“(1) The functions of the Corporation are:

(a) To provide within Australia an innovative and comprehensive broadcasting service for the nation of high quality, ensuring that the range of offerings is available to the whole Australian community, and that it reflects its geographic, cultural and social diversity.

- (b) To produce and transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:*
- (i) encourage awareness of Australia generally and also an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and*
 - (ii) enable Australian citizens living abroad or travelling outside of Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and attitudes on world affairs.*
- (c) To provide digital media services; and*
- (d) To encourage and promote educational and children's programming, dramatic and other performing arts in and around Australia.*

The above would replace the current Corporation's Charter section (1) which currently reads –

(1) The functions of the Corporation are:

- (a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:
- (i) broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and
 - (ii) broadcasting programs of an educational nature;
- (b) to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:
- (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
 - (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
 - (iii) to provide digital media services; and
- (c) to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.
(Full ABC Charter - *Addendum 5*)

Submission presented on behalf of all Australian State and Territory Presidents of ABC Friends' nationally by joint spokespersons -

Margaret Reynolds

Ranald Macdonald

Addendum 1

The objects of the Friends of the ABC are:

To support the maintenance and advancement of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC):

- (i) to fulfil to a high standard its role as an independent and comprehensive national public broadcaster;
- (ii) for it to be adequately funded by Government to allow it to fulfil its role as defined in its Charter;
- (iii) to remain independent of government influence and free of commercial sponsorship and advertising; and
- (iv) to promote Australian culture in all its diversity.

Addendum 2 (As presented by FABC during the 2013 election)



Proposed Policy on the ABC for Political Parties

Friends of the ABC seeks from all political parties and candidates for the 2013 Federal Election:

1. recognition that a well resourced, innovative, *independent* and *comprehensive* national public broadcaster is of fundamental importance to Australian democracy and culture.
2. a commitment to support the ABC to –
 - ◇ maintain its independence from government and commercial influence and its integrity in all facets of its services and operations;
 - ◇ inform, educate and entertain all Australians;
 - ◇ contribute to our sense of national identity;
 - ◇ reflect our cultural and regional diversity;
 - ◇ maintain existing ABC services and networks;
 - ◇ produce in-house high levels of quality Australian programming;
 - ◇ restore specialist program units and services cut as the result of inadequate funds;
 - ◇ provide a balance of specialist programs and programs of wider appeal, as required by the ABC Charter; and
 - ◇ strengthen its international broadcasting.
3. a commitment to –
 - a) increase the ABC's base triennial funding so that the ABC:
 - (i) is funded in a manner that ensures its independence from government;
 - (ii) can fulfil its charter responsibilities to a high standard and is Australia's pre-eminent broadcaster on all broadcasting and digital platforms;
 - (iii) has a strong presence in each state and territory;
 - (iv) produces in-house high levels of quality programming that reflects state and regional diversity;
 - (v) is adequately funded to deliver its charter responsibility of international broadcasting on all broadcasting and digital platforms free from sponsorship and advertising;
 - b) introduce an indexation system that maintains ABC funding in real terms and a mechanism that will guarantee the ABC will always be well-funded;
 - c) not change the ABC Act, including the ABC Charter, in any way which may diminish or weaken the ABC;
 - d) ensure the independence and integrity of the ABC Board by:
 - (i) maintaining a system of appointments to the board which ensures members are appointed on the basis of merit and their strong commitment to the maintenance of an independent and comprehensive national public broadcaster, and that the board is independent of political parties and the government of the day;
 - (ii) retaining the staff-elected director position on the ABC Board;
 - (iii) legislating for ABC Board transparency with regard to policy matters;
 - e) amend the ABC Act to ensure the Australian community retains full and free access, without individual cost, to ABC services, including its digital services;
 - f) maintain and strengthen the legislative prohibition of advertising and sponsorship on ABC broadcast and digital services, and prohibit commercial activities that risk the ABC's editorial independence;
 - g) ensure the critical mass required for the ABC to produce television programs that are creative and uncompromised editorially is sustained (i.e., the public broadcaster should not be reliant on purchasing programming from the private sector and program selection should not be dependent on commercial viability); and ensure that this critical mass is maintained in all program genres and in all states and territories;
 - h) replace the present systems of government assistance to private producers with one that delivers assistance in a manner that supports private producers without making it cost-ineffective for the ABC to produce programs in any genre in-house;
 - i) review the functions, operation and appointment process of the ABC National Advisory Council to enhance creative and quality community input into ABC programs and services;
 - j) maintain Australia's international television service as an ongoing service of the ABC, fully fund the ABC through the Communications portfolio to deliver international services on all broadcasting and digital platforms, and extend the prohibition of sponsorship and advertising on the ABC to all of its international services;
 - k) ensure the national broadcaster has access to transmission facilities, controls its transmission structure and has the transmission capacity to:
 - (i) fully participate in, and be at the forefront of, the technologically changing media environment;
 - (ii) provide all Australians (including rural and regional) full access to all ABC broadcasting services;
 - (iii) provide extra digital channels, for example an education channel; and
 - (iv) transmit international radio programming to at least Radio Australia's reach and extent prior to the closure of the Cox Peninsula transmission system.

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Addendum 3 (taken from ABC Annual Reports)

ABC STAFFING PERCENTAGES BY LOCATION 1986-2015

Location	1985/6	1994/5	2000/01	2004	2006	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
NSW	43.50	49.00	52.10	47.26	46.90	47.60	48.70	48.50	49.23	50.37	51.31	51.59
VIC	21.10	19.00	16.40	17.61	17.60	18.30	18.00	18.10	18.44	17.72	17.15	16.54
QLD	8.70	8.00	8.20	8.79	9.00	8.50	8.50	8.80	8.87	8.84	9.18	9.74
SA	8.60	8.00	6.80	8.29	8.30	7.80	7.70	7.70	7.58	7.43	6.90	6.76
WA	7.80	7.00	5.80	6.47	6.30	6.10	5.90	5.70	5.42	5.29	5.24	5.03
TAS	6.90	5.00	4.70	4.39	4.60	4.20	3.90	3.80	3.65	3.09	3.11	3.26
ACT	1.50	2.00	2.60	3.69	3.80	3.80	3.80	3.90	3.64	3.96	3.85	3.81
NT	0.90	2.00	2.80	2.95	2.90	2.90	2.80	2.70	2.63	2.59	2.61	2.65
O/SEAS	0.90	N/A	0.60	0.54	0.70	0.80	0.70	0.70	0.54	0.71	0.64	0.63
TOTAL	99.90	100	100	99.99	100.01	100	100	99.99	100	100	99.99	100.01

Statistics sourced from ABC Annual Reports to Parliament 1985/6, 1994/5, 2000/01, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 & 2015.

B. Mackley
2016

Addendum 4 – as reported on TV Tonight’s 19/11/2015 blog

“ABC is pledging to have Australian drama at 8:30pm across the entire ratings year in 2016 as part of a push to lift local content. Director of Television Richard Finlayson has announced an Australian Content Plan within ABC with a goal of 60% first run content in primetime. Over the past five years, first run, original content has reduced from 53% to 42%.

Finlayson told the Screen Forever Conference yesterday ABC wanted to create more returning Australian shows, more national conversations and public broadcasting events and more science, arts and educational programming.

“It means being better at what we do. Our goal is to increase our effectiveness, without sacrificing quality, by between at least 10% over the next three years,” he said.

“We are working hard at ensuring we have a culture of high performance and continuous improvement right from the studio floor to commissioning, administration to management.”

“We are looking at how we commission and have plans to make it easier and more transparent to work with us.”

“We are looking at what we commission and how we can invest in more, longer running and/or returning program brands.”

“We are partnering with international broadcasters and distributors like AMC and Netflix to tap into the burgeoning demand for high-quality, English language content with a global appeal.”

Next week ABC launches its 2016 programming highlights under the theme ‘Catch the Wonderful.’

2016 will feature 60 years of ABC TV, 50 years of **Play School**, plus new drama, documentary and election content for satirists and entertainers. Science and Arts will gain longer series, events and experimental work.

“Our Australian Content Plan is a unifying and challenging initiative with a positive vision. And with an updated rights framework, that allows us to run Australian shows more often through their licence period and relicence them again at a reasonable rate, we stand a better chance of cutting through the clutter with a distinct, independent Australian voice.”

Addendum 5 (The current ABC Charter)

Legislative framework

The ABC is a federal agency which works within the following legislative framework.

The ABC Act 1983

The *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act (1983)* (ABC Act) is the instrument which established the ABC.

- [ABC Act](#)

The ABC Charter

The ABC Charter is contained in s6 of the [ABC Act](#). It outlines the ongoing functions and responsibilities of the ABC.

6 Charter of the Corporation

(1) The functions of the Corporation are:

(a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:

(i) broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and

(ii) broadcasting programs of an educational nature;

(b) to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:

(i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and

(ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs; and to provide digital media services; and

(c) to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.

Note: See also section 31AA (Corporation or prescribed companies to be the only providers of Commonwealth-funded international broadcasting services).

(2) In the provision by the Corporation of its broadcasting services within Australia:

(a) the Corporation shall take account of:

(i) the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and community sectors of the Australian broadcasting system;

(ii) the standards from time to time determined by the ACMA in respect of broadcasting services;

(iii) the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized broadcasting programs;

(iv) the multicultural character of the Australian community; and
(v) in connection with the provision of broadcasting programs of an educational nature—the responsibilities of the States in relation to education; and

(b) the Corporation shall take all such measures, being measures consistent with the obligations of the Corporation under paragraph (a), as, in the opinion of the Board, will be conducive to the full development by the Corporation of suitable broadcasting programs.

(3) The functions of the Corporation under subsection (1) and the duties imposed on the Corporation under subsection (2) constitute the Charter of the Corporation.

(4) Nothing in this section shall be taken to impose on the Corporation a duty that is enforceable by proceedings in a court.