

The ABC: Dave Sharma doesn't get it

Dave Sharma, the Liberal Party's candidate for Wentworth, has demonstrated a seriously deficient understanding of the role of public broadcasting and the current plight of the ABC.

In a recent Candidates' Forum in Wentworth (at UNSW on 14 April), he appeared to refer to the ABC as a 'state broadcaster'. To be clear. State broadcasters are controlled by governments; they are mouthpieces for government and they brook no criticism. Think of China's state media or North Korea. The beauty of public broadcasters is that they are independent. The ABC is established by an Act of Parliament. The *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* refers to the ABC as "an independent national broadcasting service" (S.6, 2 iii); the duty of the Board is "to maintain the independence and integrity of the organisation" (s. 8 1 b).

The interest of public broadcasters is the public interest. At least part of their role is to hold powerful organisations, including political parties in and out of office, to account. Programs like the ABC's *4 Corners* shine a light into dark corners. The role of strong and independent public broadcasting is invaluable to democracy; citizens can expect to access accurate and impartial news about what is happening. The crucial importance of public broadcasting is reflected in the recent conclusions of a British House of Commons Committee on Disinformation and Fake News:

"We are facing nothing less than a crisis in our democracy-based on the systematic manipulation of data to support the relentless targeting of citizens, without their consent, by campaigns of disinformation and messages of hate" (Damian Collins, MP, Chair of Committee, 29 July 2018).

Well-funded, strong and independent public broadcasting has never been more important.

Dave Sharma, in his comments at the forum, indicated that he agreed with the \$84m cuts, announced in the 2018 federal budget and now about to take effect. Perhaps he is unaware that the ABC has suffered around \$500m in cuts since the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison government came to office. Many will remember the promise of Tony Abbott, that there would be "No cuts to the ABC; No cuts to SBS" (6 September 2013). The ABC's budget is around \$1b pa. This supports national, capital city and regional radio networks; digital radio and Radio Australia; four TV channels and major online activities including ABC News Digital, iview and streaming. The government inflicted cuts since 2014 have seen a raft of programs dismantled. Lateline and Stateline have gone; ABC TV production in Brisbane, Hobart, Adelaide and Perth has been closed. ABC drama has been slashed. Radio news and current affairs has been defunded, staff slashed and broadcast time reduced. 1000 jobs have gone; approximately a quarter of the ABC's staff.

Those opposed to the ABC have pointed to the expense of the ABC at \$1b pa. Put this in the context of the value that it provides and its standing in Australia as one of the most trusted institutions in the country. Consider that the ABC represents just 0.2% of all government expenditure. Bear in mind that the daily cost of the ABC per head is around 11 cents per day. The cost of a coffee is around \$3. It is hard to sustain a serious argument that the ABC costs too much.

My appeal to all candidates, across all parties, is that they should pledge their support for a well-funded, strong and independent ABC.

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