

Friends of the ABC (FABC): Response to the Mansfield Review of the ABC

FABC is pleased that the overwhelming support expressed by Australians across the country for the ABC was recognised by Mr Bob Mansfield. The loud and passionate public debate and the 10,615 submissions received by Mr Mansfield resulted in his acknowledging 'that Australians have placed a high value on the services of the ABC throughout its existence and this remains true of the ABC today'. Mr Mansfield recognised the unique importance of the ABC to the social fabric of the nation and the development of a distinctive Australian cultural, political and social life. He concluded, 'most private companies would envy the passion and loyalty which characterises the relationship of the ABC with its audience - it is clearly a special relationship'.

A. Mansfield Recommendations/Responses Supported by FABC

FABC welcomes Mr Mansfield's recognition that :

1. the ABC is highly valued by the Australian public, that 'the integrity of a public broadcaster is based on freedom and independence' and that the introduction of advertising or sponsorship 'would significantly reduce the level of trust people have in the independence and integrity of the ABC';
2. the ABC should 'continue to serve all Australians The ABC should continue to provide programming across the content spectrum. It is neither feasible nor desirable to restrict the ABC to the role of merely complementing the programming of the commercial sectorit must continue to have the ability to offer a wide mix of programming that both informs and entertains';
3. it is important the ABC is able to 'make the most of the opportunities presented by digital technology' and that the Government should consider a 'one-off grant towards the end of the century to assist the ABC's digital upgrade';
4. it is unreasonable to expect the ABC to fund international broadcasting services from its current budget;
5. certainty of long-term funding is required and consequently triennial funding arrangements should be reinstated;
6. the ABC should retain the ability to transmit programs outside Australia if it chooses;
7. bias in the ABC is not a genuine problem.

B. Mansfield Recommendations about which FABC is Concerned

Mr Mansfield's direction under the terms of reference for his review, to seek 'a more focused role for the ABC ... by refining the scope of current ABC services and activities', resulted in recommendations FABC believes, if implemented, will damage the ABC - reduce the range, depth and creativity of the national broadcaster.

1. Level of Funding

Mr Mansfield makes no recommendation to reverse or recommend against current funding cuts to the ABC. He did not consider the impact of the 1996/97 funding cut of \$11 million, or the \$55 million cut in 1997/98, which at the time of his report had been announced but not implemented. He proceeded with his recommendations as if it was a given that ABC funding would, and perhaps should, be cut by this amount. He assumes the ABC can provide services on a budget of \$500 million, but offers no evidence to support this proposition, or detail on the level and quality of services which he believes could reasonably be delivered for that amount.

2. Regional services, and services for youth and children (Recommendations 6,7 and 8)

Mr Mansfield recommends strengthening of regional services, and services for youth and children, but proposes no realistic way of doing this. He does not suggest any increase in ABC funding to deliver these expanded services. Instead, he suggests they be funded by selling ABC property and cutting other services. He makes general comments about the need for further management restructure but cannot say that it will deliver the level of savings required. Mr Mansfield's expressed interest in these services is undermined by his failure to address government funding cuts which will weaken them.

Rural listeners cannot be quarantined, and regional services and services for youth cannot be protected from cuts to the ABC budget .

2.1 Local ABC services suffer when other parts of the ABC are cut. Regional broadcasting relies heavily on the support and back-up of other parts of the ABC for programs, training and technical support. A sizeable volume of programming is networked to regional radio stations from other ABC networks. Regional ABC services will flourish only by maintaining the ABC as a whole.

2.2 Country people are not interested only in local issues. Along with other Australians, they rely on ABC services which originate from their state capital city and from other states. They listen to Radio National, Classic FM, Parliamentary & News Radio and Triple J. They view national television programs. Country people are interested in drama, news, current affairs, sport and a wide range of other programs broadcast by the ABC. Like other Australians, they are interested in programs being produced which reflect Australian culture and values; they are interested in the images and values portrayed through the media to their children.

Cuts to national networks, cuts in national and state programming, reduction in transmission hours - all affect the quality and quantity of broadcasting which country people receive. They also reduce the capacity of non-regional networks to report on significant local community events.

2.3 Rural communities are more disadvantaged than capital city audiences by any reduction in national and state ABC services and programs. The lower level of commercial broadcasting in rural areas means country Australians have less access to alternative broadcasters, so are

even more dependent on services provided by the ABC. They also have less access to other means of information and entertainment.

- 2.4 With the majority of Australians living in cities, urban Australia dominates many of the important decision-making processes which affect the lives of country people. It is essential for the well-being of country Australians (and for Australia as a whole) that urban Australians understand life in rural and regional Australia. The ABC plays a vital role in communicating rural and regional issues to city-dwellers. Through programs such as *Countrywide* and *Australia All Over* on radio and *Australian Story* and *Landline* on television, and through numerous documentaries and productions over the years, the ABC has brought the bush to the city. It contributes to an understanding of the experiences of country people by urban Australians, who may otherwise have little insight. The ABC is a strong unifying force in a large continent with a diverse and scattered population.^{2.5} Some of the issues outlined on the delivering of services for regional Australians, apply similarly to youth. Like any other people in our community, young people have wide and diverse interests. They are interested in a range of ABC programs which have not been produced with a specific age group in mind.

3. *Rewrite the ABC Charter (Recommendations 4 to 9; page 31 revised ABC Charter)*

Mr Mansfield recommends the ABC Charter be rewritten. He had been directed into limiting the Charter by his terms of reference to seek for the Government 'a more focussed role for the ABC ... by refining the scope of current ABC services and activities'. The version of the Charter suggested by Mr. Mansfield eliminates concepts of innovation, the arts, cultural enrichment, education, specialised broadcasting, comprehensiveness (apart from news and current affairs), high standards, international broadcasting and national identity.

FABC believes the Charter needs to remain a broad and encompassing statement. The danger in developing a charter which is too specific is that crucial items inevitably get left off the list. So far, the ABC Charter has worked well. FABC does not accept the accuracy or adequacy of Mr Mansfield's arguments for re-writing it. The present charter has not prevented the ABC developing areas which Mr. Mansfield wants specified in the Charter. For example, without specific reference to youth and regional services in the Charter, it allowed the creation of the popular youth radio network, Triple J, and regional services have been supported and extended.

Increasingly, governments of both major political persuasions have been unduly sensitive about the ABC's scrutiny of them in government. FABC is concerned at the significant risk involved if any government with an interest in curtailing and controlling the ABC seeks to rewrite its Charter.

4. *Close Radio Australia, sell Australia Television (Recommendations 3 and 18)*

FABC believes the scaling down of Radio Australia (RA) and sale of Australia Television (ATV) are retrograde steps, not in the national interest. The high international standing and invaluable service to Australia of Australia's overseas broadcaster, Radio Australia (RA), was reaffirmed in numerous submissions to, and the report of, the 1997 *Senate Inquiry into the Role and Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television*.

Through suitable transmission facilities, RA reached many millions of people who are our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region, and beyond.

Remarkably diverse voices have spoke out in support of maintaining Radio Australia - Premiers Kennett and Borbridge, supporters of liberation struggles in Burma, East Timor and Bougainville, business leaders and academics, major political leaders in Asia and the Pacific.

- 4.1 RA builds a positive relationship between Australia and other peoples in our region. It promotes understanding of, and has proved to be a cost-effective ambassador for, Australia in important areas of commerce and trade, foreign affairs and defence. The Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade told the Mansfield Review that RA plays a significant role in advancing Australia's diplomatic and trade objectives.

Prior to the Government's sale of Australia Television to Channel 7, it had begun to perform a similar role for a different audience in the region.

- 4.2 Radio Australia assists Australians living or travelling abroad. It has been critical in times of crisis, for example in Bougainville. The role of RA has been seriously limited now that funding to RA has been cut and the high frequency (i.e. shortwave) transmitters at Cox Peninsula closed. Australian diplomats and other Australians abroad have been aware of this damaging loss during recent political disturbances in Cambodia, and presently in Indonesia.
- 4.3 RA's genuinely independent broadcasting service is an important contribution of Australia to Asia and the Pacific. Our neighbours in this region have depended on RA for reliable, unbiased news and information, untainted by the control of government or private interests. The Menzies Government recognised this when it established Cox Peninsula following the 1960's riots in Indonesia.
- 4.4 At this time other countries, including Iran, are increasing their radio networks into Asia. The BBC is maintaining shortwave as a broadcasting medium at least until the year 2020. Why should Australia choose to give up the advantage of a 50-year reputation for reliability and honesty in such a competitive field?
- 4.5 Mr. Mansfield's information about RA was incomplete. He spent only one hour at Radio Australia, and acknowledged his lack of research in this area. RA reached many millions of people in Asia and the Pacific and beyond. The audience for shortwave frequency is high. At the time of the Senate Inquiry (i.e. prior to the Government's closure of the Cox Peninsula transmitters) RA's regular short-wave audience (listening at least once a week) was over five million. Its total reach was estimated in the vicinity of twenty million. (Figures from RA report 1997). Recent technological developments, such as shortwave radios which do not require batteries, and expressions of interest early this year from the US (Radio Free Asia) and British (Merlin Communications) to use Australia's Cox Peninsula transmitters, do not support Mr Mansfield's mistaken belief that shortwave is a technology of the past.

In addition to shortwave, RA transmits via cable, satellite and internet, and has rebroadcasting arrangements in some areas.

- 4.6 The Senate Committee conducting the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Role & Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television was able to conduct a more thorough and far-reaching inquiry into RA and ATV than Mr Mansfield. The majority report of the Senate Inquiry concluded, 'Radio Australia is a respected and cost-effective broadcaster attracting a large audience' and acknowledged its crucial role in furthering national interests in the Asia Pacific region. In its Executive Summary (May 1997), the Committee found, 'it would be foolish in the extreme to cut it [RA's] range of services' and recommended 'the Government provide sufficient funds, at least at current levels, to allow Radio Australia to continue to provide its range of English and foreign language services through a variety of media, especially the medium of shortwave radio.' The Committee concluded 'that as a result of Australia Television's success in market performance, in overall programming and in exceeding financial targets, Australia should not be deprived, by privatisation, of its services in furthering national interests in the Asia Pacific region. The Committee therefore recommends that (a) Australia Television not be privatised and that (b) the Government maintain funding in accordance with the three year funding package entered into by the previous government and supported in its election policy by the current GovernmentThe Committee recommends

that Australia continue to operate international public broadcasting services to the Asia Pacific region and that such services continue to be associated with the ABC but with separately identified funding.'

- 4.7 The budget for RA at the time of the Mansfield Review (i.e. before the 1997/98 budget cuts) was minimal - \$13 million per annum.

Further information on FABC's position on Radio Australia and Australia Television is contained in *FABC Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Role and Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television*.

5. Corporatising the ABC Orchestras (Recommendation 19)

The establishment of a separate structure had already been announced by the ABC. There are no savings for the ABC in this new arrangement, with orchestras retaining their funding allocation. Many members of FABC believe that promotion of Australian culture would have been best served by maintaining a closer link between live performances and broadcasting of music, with the orchestras remaining an integral part of the ABC.

6. Outsource television production, except for news and current affairs (Recommendation 15)

FABC is strongly opposed to any extension of outsourcing.

- 6.1 The Australian public want the high-quality, innovative and varied smorgasbord of programs we have seen on the ABC. The community want to continue to be informed and entertained by ABC productions as diverse as *Phoenix*, *The D-Generation*, *The Late Show*, *Club Buggery*, *Mother and Son*, *I Can Jump Puddles*, *Labor in Power*, *The Liberals*, and presently, *Foreign Correspondent* and *Australian Story*. They rely upon programs with the integrity of *Play School* for their children. They appreciate co-productions which would not be produced without the ABC's studios, creative and technical staff - *Wildside*, *Blue Murder*, *Leaving of Liverpool* and *Brides of Christ*, to name only a few.

The axing of staff and closure and sale of ABC television studios would leave the ABC with only a minuscule creative television production base. Programs which probe, parody and reflect the diversity of Australian life would be even fewer.

This partial privatisation of the ABC would result in it becoming a customer for what the commercial sector has to offer. We have already seen that the demands of commercial production lead to programs which are generally of lesser quality, are more homogenised and internationalised. The need of private producers to maximise profit results in fewer risk-taking innovative programs and fewer programs made specifically for local audiences, as they produce with their eye on the larger overseas market. The public already has the choice to watch these formula-type programs on commercial networks.

The national broadcaster's production capacity is characterised by a unique editorial and geographical spread, and the diversity of the ABC's skill base across a range of media forms. Experience of people working together over a period of time builds production excellence. Robin Williams (presenter of the ABC Science Show) has spoken of the essential element of a team working and developing over many years, which resulted in David Attenborough's excellent wildlife series. The same applies to the specialised skills of the reporters on *Foreign Correspondent*.

Mr Andrew Lloyd James, Commissioning Editor at the head of ABC Networks, and past commissioning editor with SBS, explained in the *Weekend Australian* (Feb 97) why outsourcing the bulk of ABC program production will not work for the ABC: producing television material is not like producing cans in a factory. Many of the ABC's best and most innovative productions have been in-house because of the passionate involvement of the producers over a period of time, and unless you have an ancillary corporation you end up with formula material which is fine for commercial TV, but wrong for the ABC. Mr Lloyd James explained that bulk outsourcing cannot deliver a balanced schedule because television production requires internal capability to respond to needs, and to get a mix of programming.

6.2 The ABC already outsizes a sizeable amount of production. It has a hybrid model, comprised of outsourcing, co-productions and in-house productions. In February 1997, Brian Johns, the ABC Managing director reported that ABC Network Television produces only around half the programs appearing on its schedule. By comparison, the BBC produces 90 per cent of its schedule. Mr Johns advised that in the 1996/97 financial year the ABC is spending around \$196 million on the production of original Australian television programs (4,000 hours). Just over 23 per cent of this general programs budget will be spent on co-productions or the commissioning of complete programs from the independent production sector. Recent moves by the ABC to increase the extent of outsourcing have already given rise to serious concern in the community.

6.3 The ABC's strong role as a producer supports the private production sector in several ways:

- (i) Through the ABC's creative interaction with private producers, the national broadcaster supports the development of the private production sector in Australia.

Mr John Willis, Program Director for Channel Four (which operates as a niche broadcaster commissioning programs), has said that it had been very helpful for Channel Four to sit alongside a big national broadcaster, the BBC, benefiting from the training and development undertaken by that great institution. He observed that the BBC could fish in both production pools. It could use the best independent producers, and at the same time nurture and develop its own in-house talent.

- (ii) Through the movement to commercial media of creative and technical staff trained and instilled with values of high quality production at the ABC, the ABC in effect supports the private production sector. Many high-profile presenters and producers on commercial media were trained at the ABC.

- (iii) If the ABC no longer has the capacity to set benchmarks of excellence in production, the standard of private production companies may drop.

6.4 Mr. Mansfield makes this recommendation to disperse the creative talent and resources of the ABC, even though he acknowledges that he is unable to establish if it would be cheaper for the ABC to buy programs from the private sector, rather than to make them in-house. He states, 'I have not been able to obtain a reliable comparison of the production costs of the ABC and the independent production sector because of the different methods used and their lack of transparency'.

6.5 Mr Mansfield has not addressed the fundamental issue of copyright. If the ABC does not retain its own ability to make programs, it will get access only to limited program rights. Private producers will seek copyright of the programs, at great financial loss to the ABC. The ABC will need to pay television rights here and overseas, film and video distribution rights, rights for multimedia and on-line services, for merchandising and print.

6.6 As the number of channels in the broadcasting system expands, demand for content to broadcast on these channels will increase. In giving up its role as a producer of television

programs, the ABC would forego a valuable source of future income which could be secured from royalties and sale of its own programs to 'content-hungry' broadcasters in a growing multi-channel environment.

- 6.7 The community relies on the scrupulous independence of the ABC in news and current affairs. High standards of impartiality, accuracy and depth of coverage are maintained because the ABC is independent - independent from government and independent from commercial pressures, and relies on its own resources for news gathering. If programs are contracted out to a private producer, this independence is seriously compromised. Editorial control is lost to another party. Unlike the ABC, this party's primary purpose for existence is to make a profit. It may have other personal and commercial interests, and certainly, unlike the ABC, it is not governed by any enforceable obligation which would ensure integrity and independence.

In exempting news and current affairs from his recommendation to outsource television production, Mr Mansfield recognised that the integrity of ABC news and current affairs could only be guaranteed by the ABC continuing to produce its own. However, FABC does not believe it would prove possible to quarantine this important area. Identification of programming as 'current affairs' is sometimes unclear, if not controversial - particularly in these days of 'infotainment'.

A recent example of the difficulty of defining current affairs is the ABC's planned co-production with a private company of a series of interviews featuring Jana Wendt. FABC does not accept that interviews of world political leaders by Jana Wendt, a personality clearly identified with current affairs, can be deemed not to be current affairs. Others strongly disagreed.

If an outsourced production - one which is current affairs, is perceived by significant people or perceived by a sizeable number of the viewing public as current affairs - falls short of ABC standards of independence for any of a number of reasons, it will taint the credibility of all news and current affairs programs seen on the ABC. The trust and respect earned by our national public broadcaster, as the result of its scrupulous independence, could be undermined very quickly.

- 6.8 This recommendation is not compatible with Mr. Mansfield's emphasis on strengthening regional broadcasting. The private production sector is concentrated in NSW and Victoria - with 58% of all employment in NSW.
- 6.9 The *Sydney Morning Herald* (25.5.1997) reported the ABC must borrow \$40 million over four years (at an interest rate of eight percent) to cover the redundancy payments for the hundreds of staff who must leave due to funding cuts to the ABC's budget. An increase in the level of television production which is outsourced will result in further cuts to staff, which in turn will result in the ABC having to waste even more of its scarce resources on redundancy payments.
- 6.10 If ABC television becomes overwhelmingly a broadcaster of other people's productions, the long-term viability of the ABC would be in doubt, as increasingly the question is asked, 'What is the purpose of having an ABC?'

7. *Sell Real Estate - maintaining ownership only of properties with strategic value to broadcasting functions (Recommendation 16)*

This recommendation goes hand in hand with Mr Mansfield's recommendation to privatise ABC television production. In line with our strong belief that the ABC must maintain a significant role as a

producer, production facilities need to be maintained. In the past five years both the BBC and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have added to their production facilities.

FABC believes it would be uneconomical to rent facilities on the private market. Premises for broadcasting and production are purpose-built, and because the cost of relocating would be prohibitive, the ABC would be in a weak position to negotiate rental rates. In any case, there would be inadequate government funding to cover rental costs.

Selling off production locations will guarantee that ABC in-house production is finished for good - locking the ABC out of television production in the future. Further, it is a short-sighted and uneconomic proposal to sell off real estate to raise revenue. You can only sell the family farm once. FABC believes the ABC should review its infrastructure and property requirements so as to manage them in the most effective manner for production and broadcasting now and into the future.

8. Implement Cross-Media Program Production (Recommendation 14)

While there may be some economic benefit in combining production facilities, if and when the technology will allow, FABC believes that combining radio, television and multimedia program makers, as Mr Mansfield recommends, will result in less diversity of information and entertainment on the ABC. Such a move is likely to lead to a rationalisation of producers, research staff and presenters, thereby reducing the range of matters dealt with, and diminishing the perspectives and opinions presented on the ABC. The public do not want to see and hear more of the same. They appreciate the individual interpretations and creativity expressed on different programs - for example, the different matters dealt with on a radio arts program compared with a television arts program, or the different perspective and presentation of the same event or issue on different programs. They appreciate that if they do not personally like the style of a particular program or presenter, they have the opportunity to hear or view some of the same topics addressed in a different manner by a different presenter.

Diversity in the ABC enables it to provide balance by providing a range of perspectives. With less diversity of views being expressed, will this later lead to accusations of bias?

9. Australian Content (Recommendations 6, 9 and page 31)

Mr Mansfield made a broad statement of principle in recommending the ABC Charter should 'reflect Australia's regional and cultural diversity ... and make use of Australia's creative resources'. The present ABC Charter has not limited the ABC in these areas. It is adequate funding which is required to give effect to them.