

## **PUBLIC BROADCASTING AS A 'CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY'**

**"Don't mess with Aunty"<sup>1</sup>**

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I have provided below a few statements about the important role played by public broadcasting in general, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission in particular.

‘Public broadcasting is ‘broadcasting made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through [public service broadcasting], citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, public service broadcasting can serve as a cornerstone of democracy.’<sup>2</sup>

The importance of regional reach and content is one of the critical roles of the ABC as a public broadcaster, specifically set out in its Charter:

‘The Charter directs that ABC services must reflect what is seen as the traditional role for a public broadcaster—to deliver policy objectives through the broadcast of programs that inform, educate and entertain. It must also address market failure, in areas such as the delivery of local content. Further, its programming must contribute to national Australian identity and reflect cultural diversity.’<sup>3</sup>

The ABC is sometimes attacked for bias. The ‘Friends of the ABC’ disposed of the issue of ABC bias, suggesting that it tended to be in the eye of the beholder - generally the government of the day:

Accusations of bias continue to be made against the ABC, but they are most usually made in general terms, lacking specifics. While few would agree that bias is entirely in the eye of the beholder, it is difficult to measure, and difficult to get unanimous agreement about the whether or not a particular program was biased.

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<sup>1</sup> Greens Senator Scott Ludlum, a protest meeting, sent a message to the Abbott Government: ‘Don’t mess with Aunty’. Senator Ludlum will chair a special Senate Hearing into the ABC budget cuts on 12 December 2014 <http://scott-ludlam.greensmps.org.au/content/media-releases/senate-select-committee-hold-urgent-hearings-abc-sbs-budget-cuts>.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) cited in ‘The ABC - an overview [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ABCoverview](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ABCoverview))

<sup>3</sup> ‘The ABC - an overview [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ABCoverview](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ABCoverview))

Most of the complaints about bias in the ABC have come from the government of the day – Labor or Liberal. Significantly both parties have been far less hostile to the ABC when in opposition.<sup>4</sup>

The fight for local content and access is vital, as is the importance of the ABC in its role of defining what Australia is. Do we want to be Australian or a confused colonial outpost of two parents: the USA and Britain?

The character of Australia 'owes much to the ABC; no other institution reaches as many Australians, or touches so many so profoundly. The national broadcaster not only helps fashion Australian life, it is also a deeply personal part of innumerable individual lives. ...

Just try to imagine Australia without a national broadcaster. You can imagine an Australia, but not this Australia. The character of this Australia owes much to the ABC; no other institution reaches as many Australians, or touches so many so profoundly. The national broadcaster not only helps fashion Australian life, it is also a deeply personal part of innumerable individual lives.<sup>5</sup>

ABC's own future document '*The ABC in the Digital Age - Towards 2020* (undated) identified various future roles for the ABC, including that it be: universal 'available to all Australians regardless of geographic or economic circumstances, and present on all delivery platforms'; and local 'the "town square" for local communities where information is exchanged and issues discussed, and a critical source of information in times of crisis and emergency'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D Cassidy, 'ABC bias—verdict from the government appointed umpire', Friends of the ABC, 2005 (updated 2010) cited in 'The ABC - an overview' (see above).

<sup>5</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 2007, cited in 2020 - ABC in the Digital Age [http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2020\\_ABC\\_in\\_the\\_Digital\\_Age.pdf](http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2020_ABC_in_the_Digital_Age.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2020\\_ABC\\_in\\_the\\_Digital\\_Age.pdf](http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2020_ABC_in_the_Digital_Age.pdf)