

No ABC? No Way!

In danger of going under the radar of Federal Budget observers is one relatively small item with huge implications: the ABC's budget for the next triennium. Constituting only about 0.5% of the Government's total budget, ABC funding is easily overlooked. And that is at the heart of the crisis facing the ABC.

Like a thief in the night, budget cuts have been stealing from all aspects of the broadcaster's operations. Over the last 20 years the ABC's budget has been cut by a massive 30%, and programming quality, morale, and the capacity for forthright criticism have been eroded, slowly but perceptibly. There is now a real risk of the ABC continuing to exist in name only.

"Underlying all the ABC's problems – from the big to the trivial – is lack of money"¹

However, it's not just the fact that the ABC has \$51 million less for programming than it had in 1995-96². Nor the fact that the ABC has \$250 million dollars less, in real terms, than it had in 1985³. Not even the fact that since triennial funding for the ABC was introduced in 1989, each of the ABC's five requests for additional funds for continuing and new activities has been rejected by the government of the day.⁴ Over time, inadequate funding has infected the culture of the organisation.

Fear of biting the hand that feeds it has had its effects - scarcely surprising considering the hand currently in question. It was this Government which on coming to office cut \$65 million out of the ABC's budget over two years; it was this Government's Minister who, though responsible for the ABC, led the attack on the ABC's reporting of the Iraq war in 2003; it was this Government which in 2002 ignored Macquarie Bank recommendations for greater ABC funding over the triennium 2003 – 06; and it was the current Minister whose first ABC Board appointment was Janet Albrechtsen.

Donald McDonald may describe the maintenance of editorial independence from, but financial dependence upon, Government as "paradoxical", but it is less benign than that.

The ABC's strategic priority, articulated in its corporate plan for 2004-07 - to increase audiences – is a direct result of its financial dependence on government. As Quentin Dempster points out, the corporate plan "is a business plan,not a cultural plan or a plan for creative diversity, which might promulgate original ideas or point out new paths to be pursued".⁵

¹ Simons, Margaret *Fear and Loathing at the ABC*, *The Monthly* May 2005, p.31

² Hansard Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee Estimates, 31 October 2005, p.59

³ ABC Annual Report 2004, p.39

⁴ McDonald, Donald, Address to the National Press Club, 1 June 2005

⁵ Dempster, Quentin, *The Slow Destruction of the ABC*, in Robert Manne (ed) *Do Not Disturb* p.102

Any aim to increase audience numbers should always be formulated in the context of the ABC's legislative obligations. According to Quentin Dempster although these obligations are mentioned in the ABC's corporate plan, "everyone at the ABC knows that the executive and management game is all about ratings".⁶ (The ABC has a broad Charter which requires it to provide innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard; to foster a sense of national identity and an Australian perspective on the world; to inform and entertain; to broadcast educational programmes; to broadcast outside Australia; and to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts).

The problem with chasing ratings is that it is barely distinguishable from the chase by the commercial media for consumers of their advertising – and the consequent dive into bland uniformity. The fact that the ABC has been successful in lifting its ratings, in radio and in television, is seen by some as the reason for programming which Errol Simper described as "more about lightweight material that could fit far too comfortably at Seven or Nine".⁷ John Cleary says that twenty years of funding cuts have resulted in the dismantling of specialist production structures. "Budget and resources control has been removed from the content specialists and given to the network managers whose success is dependent on increasing audience numbers for their networks".⁸

This damaging pursuit of audiences can be seen as a desperate bid by the ABC to lift its ratings with the Government. In consequence of this Government's refusal to acknowledge the inadequacy of ABC funding, the ABC is hoping that by widening its appeal it will increase its chances in the next funding bid.

Another illustration of the more than "paradoxical" nature of the financial dependence of the ABC has been in the lead-up to the release of details of the ABC's Budget submission.

In what has been the nearest it gets to frenzy, the ABC began as early as last May to release snippets of insight into the financial constraints it has been operating under. The first was the revelation of the exact drop in hours of ABC-produced Australian drama since 2001: 100 hours then, but 20 hours in 2005. Not only were the figures alarming, and very effective in getting responses from both the public and the entertainment industry, but they were extraordinary for being made public at all. The ABC is usually 'upselling' itself, in public at least.

The next release was by Donald McDonald when he told the National Press Club what a marvellous institution the ABC is and what lengths the ABC had gone to to convince the Government of its merits. He revealed then that it was the ABC itself which had requested the Government to commission a review of the adequacy – or otherwise – of the ABC's funding, in the hope of making

⁶ Dempster, Q. op.cit. p.102

⁷ Simper, Errol, *The Australian* 12 May 2005

⁸ Cleary, John quoted in Dempster, Q. op.cit. p.107

a convincing case before the ABC prepared its Budget submission. The same month Russell Balding made a public appearance at the American Chamber of Commerce to enumerate what Australian taxpayers get for their 10 cents a day.

This was starting to look like a publicity campaign. It generated interest. And at Senate Estimates in October, Senator Lyn Allison asked if there were other areas than drama where the ABC was pressed for funds. After a very general answer, to the effect that there was cost pressure across the entire organisation, she asked:

*“You do not want to give the committee some more precise examples?” to which the ABC officer replied, “No, I do not think so”.*⁹

Those figures on cuts in ABC drama production were now looking as rare a revelation as they in fact were. But it can't be comfortable sitting next to the Minister at Estimates when it is she who will shortly be approving the ABC's Budget submission, which of course she will be presenting to Cabinet.

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The ABC's vulnerability resulting from its financial dependence has been aggravated by sustained attacks on the independence of its news and current affairs coverage. The ABC is under constant attack, if not by its own Minister then by other Government members and by a cacophony of right-wing media critics. So sustained have the allegations of bias been that “the public affairs programs on ABC television and radio have become increasingly timid and have lost their nerve”.¹⁰ Robert Manne is not alone in that view.

Yet the need for balanced, accurate, and impartial current affairs coverage by an independent public broadcaster has never been greater. The alternative - what passes for news in the commercial media - is illustrated by a recent Australian Broadcasting Authority investigation into the commercial radio station, 5AA, (Festival City Broadcasters) in Adelaide.

Talkback host Bob Francis introduced the subject of the Redfern riots over the death of 17-year-old Aboriginal boy, T.J. Hickey in this way:

*“The Aboriginal elders – have a listen to this; listen, listen, sit and listen; put your ears close to the radio – the Aboriginal elders in Sydney have called the riots in Sydney a ‘display of grief’ [Blows a ‘raspberry’]. How dare you call it a display of grief? You’re dirty, rotten bastards. Getting out there and fighting the police in a situation like that, and calling that a ‘display of grief’? It was a display of the worst type of behaviour I’ve ever seen occurring in Australia here. If you’re a member of an Aboriginal community, give me a call and let’s have an argument about it”.*¹¹

⁹ Hansard Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee Estimates, 31 October 2005 p. 50

¹⁰ Manne Robert (ed.) *Do Not Disturb* p.2

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The ABA found that not only had 5AA broadcast material that was likely to have incited racial hatred, but it had also failed to respond to a listener's written complaint. The punishment? No action except to note that Bob Francis, the presenter, and others would be given 'training and assistance' by the radio station and that the station is to monitor its programs.

In March 2005, shortly after the broadcast, 5AA topped the radio ratings for Adelaide. In October Bob Francis was inducted into the commercial radio Hall of Fame.

Clearly talkback is good business. As Jon Faine points out, " Publicly listed providers.... do not provide this programming to their audiences as a public service, form of philanthropy or out of a sense of community obligation. This type of radio makes money. Lots of money".¹²

By contrast the ABC, in the presentation of news and current affairs, requires that editorial staff "not allow their professional judgment to be influenced by pressures from political, commercial or other sectional interests or by their own personal views".¹³

Bob Francis and 5AA don't shape up too well against that measure - but on the commercial media, news and current affairs programming has given way to talkback shows, and professional journalists have been displaced by on-air 'personalities'. The treatment of news and current affairs on the ABC is clearly very different. Equally clearly, criticism of the commercial media and of the ABC is also very different.

When asked what quality distinguished the ABC from its commercial competitors, Andrew Olle is said to have replied, "Credibility". One measure of credibility is found in ABC guidelines which state that "Pursuing impartiality should not mean endorsing the status quo..... The ABC seeks to be a pace-setter in community discussion: not for the purpose of shaping community views and values but to ensure that Australians have an opportunity to be well-informed and questioning."¹⁴

When Robert Manne did a credibility check on the reporting of the Iraq War by the Murdoch press he found that, for example, the *Australian's* Greg Sheridan's "analyses of the terrible Iraqi threat were untouched by doubt. In August 2002 he already knew not only that Saddam Hussein possessed a vast arsenal of chemical and biological weapons but that he would possess nuclear weapons in 'one or two years'. When British Prime Minister Tony Blair released his weapons dossier Sheridan posed the following dilemma:

http://www.aba.gov.au/newspubs/radio_TV/investigations/broadcast_operations/documents/radio/2005/1395_5AA.pdf

¹² Faine, Jon *Talk Radio and Democracy* in Robert Manne (ed) op. cit. p.188

¹³ <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/edpol02.pdf> News and Current Affairs. 6.3.1

¹⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/edpol02.pdf> News and Current Affairs. 6.3.2

‘Either Tony Blair is a monstrous liar or Saddam Hussein is. Take your pick’.¹⁵

That example was only one used by Robert Manne to illustrate the lack of editorial independence in the Murdoch press. The opportunity for Australians to be “well-informed and questioning” has no place in Rupert Murdoch’s commercial empire, and he himself had said, ‘With our newspapers we have indeed supported Bush’s foreign policy. And we remain committed that way’.¹⁶

Yet back at the ABC Kerry O’Brien is anxious about the impact on the professionalism of his *7.30 Report* team of lack of resources. The loss of one third of its editorial staff in the last nine years has meant that “You might shy away from a particular story because you know you simply won’t be able to do it justice”. Things like travel, or overseas satellite crosses, are among the items which have to be carefully considered or cut altogether because of cost.¹⁷

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The need for a fearless and well-funded ABC could hardly be greater. The lack of informed discussion, the limited opportunity for parliamentary, let alone public, scrutiny of major legislation has shown this Government’s disregard for the public’s right to know. In this environment the role of the media has become crucial in providing basic information, in stimulating debate, and in holding the Government to account. The media should be the mortar in the structure of a democracy. The bricks are held together only if there is the exchange of ideas, informed, wide-reaching and questioning.

Watch closely this May: the Federal Budget will reveal what future there is for the ABC – and for fearless criticism of government.

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April 2006

¹⁵ Manne, Robert, *Murdoch and the War on Iraq* in Robert Manne (ed) op.cit. p.81

¹⁶ Manne, Robert, op.cit. p.77

¹⁷ Simons, Margaret *Fear and Loathing at the ABC* The Monthly May 2005 p.32