



ON AIR

Newsletter of Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) Inc

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME...!

...since our last issue of On Air. We've had our Annual General Meeting (see report p.2), our end of year dinner - addressed by ABC General Manager Mark Scott (see report p.4), and we've had the elections.

Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) put in enormous effort to raise awareness among the voters and the candidates about the ABC's importance. We pounded the pavements and letterboxed extensively in the ACT, but our campaign to Save the ABC by Saving the Senate did not result in the election of a second non-Coalition ACT Senator. In Eden-Monaro we ran numerous stalls from Braidwood to Bungendore, from Cooma to Queanbeyan, and we mailed the entire electorate with our "Vote No to ads on our ABC" leaflet. We can be very pleased that Mike Kelly, who was very positive when we handed him the petition opposing ads on the ABC, is now the Member for Eden-Monaro. (Details of our campaigning are on p5)

Now, with a new Government we hope for a supportive and indeed invigorating atmosphere for the ABC. We must press for funding which really is adequate for a public broadcaster in a changing media world; we must keep the ALP to its promises about a transparent, merit-based procedure for ABC Board appointments, and to restore the Staff Elected Director to the ABC Board; and we must be outspoken against the creeping commercialism which is threatening the ABC's independence.

One thing we discovered during the election campaign is the widespread and deep-seated opposition to ads on the ABC. We must not let the Government, or ABC management, ever overlook this opposition. In particular we must keep the ALP to its promise to prohibit advertising on ABC branded websites, as well as maintaining the ban on advertising on ABC radio and TV.

As part of this pressure a delegation of FABC Presidents saw Stephen Conroy, the new Minister for Communications ("Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy" to give him his correct title) in February. Alan Knight from Queensland, Mal Hewitt from New South Wales, and I were pleased to be able to see Stephen Conroy so early in the Government's new term.

As far as ABC funding in the forthcoming budget goes, Mr. Conroy made clear that funding priority is being given to pre-election commitments by the ALP—and of course there were no ABC funding

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IDEAS WANTED

The Friends are looking for ideas. We would love some input on what our members would like to see the Friends of the ABC doing. We would love to get out into the community to drum up support for our cause and raise awareness of ABC issues. All suggestions and comments are welcome.

-Ed.

Email your suggestions to editor@fabcact.org or send snail mail to: Friends of the ABC, 1 Bonney St, Ainslie ACT, 2602

EDITOR'S NOTE

As the new editor of On Air, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask our members for letters. Do you have an ABC issue you would like to bring to the attention of the Friends? On Air is the perfect forum to voice your concerns and raise awareness of ABC issues. If you are interested in an ABC topic, chances are the rest of us will be too.

-Ben Chaplin (Editor)

I can be emailed at editor@fabcact.org

Or send snail mail to: Friends of the ABC,

1 Bonney St, Ainslie ACT, 2602

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME... cont

commitments made by Labor in the lead-up to the election. However this is not a triennium year for the ABC, but next year is. Minister Conroy invited Friends of the ABC to put up propositions about inclusions in the ABC's budget for 2009–2012. (Why don't we suggest that, as the KPMG review has been secreted into Archives for 30 years, a new review into the adequacy of the ABC's funding be commissioned by this Government?)

Two ABC Board positions fall vacant this year, and the Minister said no new appointments will be made until the ALP's "Nolan rules-type" appointment procedures are in place. This Government will not spill the ABC Board but will allow current Board Members' terms of office to expire.

Legislation will be necessary to reinstate the Staff Elected Director position, and to ban advertising on ABC online. Getting its legislation past the Senate will be difficult, even after the new Senate in July, but we must keep up the pressure so that difficulties do not become a pretext for shelving a promised change.

You, the devoted Friends, can help to maintain this pressure. Contact your local Members. Now that the Federal Members of the House of Representatives for the ACT and for Eden-Monaro are in the party in Government, ask them to lobby the Minister for Communications, as well as the ministers holding the purse-strings - Treasurer Wayne Swan and Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner (a former Shadow Communications Minister).

The vision which Minister Conroy articulated for the ABC - and he did so with some passion - is that it should be "a champion of Australian content". In his opinion the ABC is the only way we can guarantee Australian voices: we can't rely on regulating content levels.

This is indeed a positive vision.

Let's keep them up to it!

Jill Greenwell

President ACT & Region



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

By Barbara Godfrey

On Saturday 27 October 2007, about 50 members attended the Annual General Meeting at the Griffin Centre.

Members were welcomed by the President, Jill Greenwell who provided a thorough briefing on the events of the past year through her President's Report – items such as our campaign to keep the ABC independent of commercial influences; our stance on ABC Board appointments; the reinstatement of the staff-elected Board member; and adequate funding. We have met with politicians from all major parties as well as the Managing Director of the ABC (who agreed to be the guest speaker at our annual dinner). Jill outlined our campaigns to target the marginal seat of Eden-Monaro to ensure people were aware of ABC related issues in the 2007 election, and also to campaign for a second non-Coalition ACT Senator to safeguard the ABC. Jill also thanked those members who had contributed throughout the year by working on stalls, writing letters and letter-boxing to get our message to the community.

Jill paid tribute to retiring committee member Margaret O'Connor who has served for the past seven years as either President, Vice President and national spokesperson.

Nominations were taken for people wanting to be on the committee. The list of committee members can be seen in another part of this newsletter.

Members were then entertained by our guest speakers Moya Simpson and John Shortis. Their combined skills make up Shortis and Simpson - who have enthralled local audiences with their particular brand of music and satire for many years. John Shortis has worked as a composer, songwriter, musician, scriptwriter and music historian since 1971. He has written hundreds of songs for children and worked freelance for the ABC as a scriptwriter for music broadcasts. John is passionate about the importance of music in the education process and through ABC radio's school programme it was possible to reach children throughout Australia.

Moya Simpson has carved out a career built upon her extraordinary vocal versatility, comic timing and energetic delivery of whatever she takes on, including the formation of two choirs.

Based in Canberra, they specialise in shows that reflect Australian history and politics in a way that is funny, satirical and informative. They perform regularly at our national cultural institutions and theatres. They were very pleased to address our group as they hold the ABC in high regard and we were honoured to hear them.

The afternoon concluded with refreshments and happy discussion among those present.

WHY NOT CHECK IT OUT

www.fabcact.org

Podcasting or Paidcasting?

It feels just a little strange without the constant ringing of “bad union bosses” or “working families” in my ear.

And you too will have been saturated with election reflection over the last few months. I’ll leave more of that to informed people to cover in ‘On Air’ and ‘Background Briefing’.

There was one issue I would like to talk about and that is ‘podcasting’. “Pod – what?” some of you may ask. According to www.abc.net.au, “Podcasting is a convenient way of automatically downloading audio or video files to your computer. You can then play this audio or video on your computer or transfer the files to a portable MP3 or video player.” ‘Vodcasting’ is the equivalent term used for downloadable video files.

The ABC through its website provides pod and vodcasting services to its audiences for much of its television and radio programming. It is the new frontier for many Australians who want to access information and entertainment where, when and how they want. At the risk of sounding too much like a corporate spokesman, it’s fair to say that the national broadcaster has been at the forefront of this technology and has responded well to users’ needs. The proof is in the pudding (or should that be podding?).

Check out some of the impressive figures released by the ABC in July 2007:

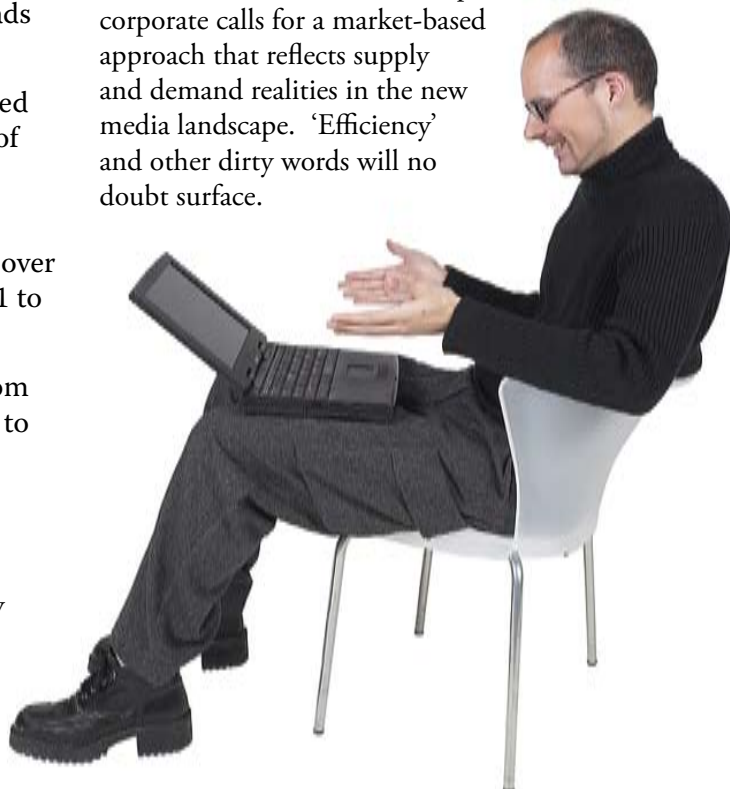
- ▶▶ ABC vodcasts jumped from an average of 769,000 monthly downloads in the first half of the year (2007) to over 1.4 million downloads in July;
- ▶▶ The total number of ABC podcasts increased by over 1 million, from a monthly average of 2 million from January to June, to over 3.5 million downloads in July;
- ▶▶ Radio National program podcasts were up over 200,000, from a monthly average of 913,961 to 1,149,868 in July; and
- ▶▶ Radio Australia downloads skyrocketed from 302,000 (January to June monthly average) to 1.3 million in July.
- ▶▶ Information from www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/media/s2009270.htm

These statistics don’t reflect a trend as much as they do a revolution. We should bear in mind also that these figures are now quite outdated. As one of over 1 million Australians living or travelling overseas, I particularly rely on podcasts to keep

up to date with goings on back home. Where I am in Tokyo, there is unsurprisingly little coverage of Australia, other than of course the odd fashion (read: Ian Thorpe) story. In the lead up to the November 24 plebiscite for example, I was rescued from seclusion by podcasting. With just a PC and an internet connection, I was able to watch all our favourite political experts (Gerard, Piers and Bolt) on Insiders or Lateline. Simultaneously, thousands of more hip Australians worldwide were no doubt downloading their favourite JTV or Chaser features.

I think we should appreciate the high standard and easy access of ABC podcasting services. An additional attraction is the absence of cost beyond an internet connection fee (which people will pay for regardless) and our daily ABC fee through our taxes. Today, these services remain a public good. But for how long? When will podcasting become ‘paidcasting’? Will we be willing to pay? Regardless, is it right that we pay in light of the ABC’s mandate?

Prior to the throning of Kevin07, we heard hints from ABC management that a payment system for podcasting is a future possibility. This may apply only to certain programs, for example older episodes of programs commanding a limited audience. Regardless, if this issue uploads itself in public debate, we can expect to see complex ideological, economic and political fault-lines appear. There will be continued expectations that the ABC provide free and easy access for all Australians. Juxtaposed with this will be corporate calls for a market-based approach that reflects supply and demand realities in the new media landscape. ‘Efficiency’ and other dirty words will no doubt surface.



Podcasting or Paidcasting?...cont

Understandably, now that I know that I can conveniently 'podcast' programs, I will expect continued access. As a taxpayer, I don't want to be treated like I'm just another consumer. A user-pays system may send downloads downwards and sadly price some out of the market for quality information. We'll be on the slippery slope already.

Speaking of quality, the depth and diversity of the ABC's election coverage before, during and after election night itself, reminded us of the importance of the ABC (not withstanding Kerry's odd and condemned to be repeated faux

pas about "a swing to the ABC" on the big night). The ABC won the TV ratings battle despite Channel 7's attempts to sex-up politics through its election-erection style production. Surely that type of satire is better left to either the Chaser or Jackie Kelly.

The ABC will need time to recover from 12 years of deliberate antagonism under the Howard government. The good nieces and nephews will be waiting to see if the Rudd administration will restore a resourced and valued Aunty to us. Podcasting may be an early test to see if broad access is

sacrificed for the sake of a few extra bucks.

Be sure to keep an eye (pod) out for this issue next year.

Editor-in-exile

Mark Notaras

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ANNUAL DINNER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE ABC (ACT and Region)

Report by Ann Hosking

After a year of hard work we were able to celebrate together at our annual dinner on 28th November at the CIT. Our guest speaker was the Managing Director of the ABC, Mark Scott. To have such a busy and distinguished guest address us was a real coup for our president, Jill Greenwell.

Mr Scott expressed pleasure at being with us, noting the atmosphere was far friendlier than in some meetings he had attended since taking up his position. He knew and felt he was truly among friends and would be preaching to the converted. He gave a wide ranging review of the activities of the ABC and its plans for the future. He celebrated the unique position the ABC holds in communications in Australia and believes the ABC does fulfill its charter to entertain, inform,

reflect our culture and celebrate its diversity. The ABC's freedom from the commercial and editorial constraints of the commercial media allows for innovation not imitation. The ABC is able to take risks and present more Australian content and tell Australian stories, as in the production of programs such as Summer Heights High, Bastard Boys and The Choir of Hard Knocks.

He celebrated the importance of local radio with local news about local issues making the ABC the number 1 rating news station in Australia. The ABC connects directly to communities. For 75 years the ABC has been the nation's trusted "baby sitter", making the creation of a dedicated children's channel a priority. With its own overseas reporters, the ABC presents the world to Australia. In turn, with its overseas program reaching 43 countries, it presents Australia to the world. There are a quarter of a million podcasters, and in India the ABC out-rates the BBC.

He spoke of the many documentaries, arts and drama programs produced by the ABC and its plans for expansion. With new technology our ABC can be Australia's town square where we "talk" to each other. In all this our funding model from consolidated revenue is essential compared to the Canadian or US donation-based models. He is committed to no advertising on the ABC.

In all these things only the ABC can do it.

The ABC has a unique and treasured connection with Australians, is uniquely valued and gives value for money.



POWER TO THE PEOPLE-US!

By Jane Timbrell

The 2007 Federal Election Campaign kept the FABC (ACT & Region) members very busy.

In the months leading to the elections we focused our energies on the marginal seat of Eden-Monaro and the major population centres of Queanbeyan, Jerrabomberra, Cooma, Bungendore and Braidwood. We made ourselves visible at markets and at street stalls.

The stalls were staffed by Committee members and members who had put their names onto our helpers' list. Our presence took the form of distributing balloons to the children, and engaging their parents about the importance of the ABC as part of the fabric of our society.

We took the initiative to collect a petition at the stalls regarding "no ads on our ABC" which in turn, we directed to the candidates standing for each of

the major parties in the electorate. In the week before the Election, our President, Jill Greenwell, and Organising Secretary, Jane Timbrell, presented nearly 1000 signatures to both Mike Kelly (ALP) and Keith Hughes (Greens). Unfortunately, Gary Nairn (Liberal) did not respond to our request until 26 November (after the election).

We also circulated to every household in Eden-Monaro a leaflet entitled "No Ads on our ABC". This document outlined the threats of advertising on ABC radio and television, and explained the various political parties' policy - and practice - on advertising on the ABC.

Our efforts were an outstanding contribution for such a small organization in such an inaccessible electorate. The FABC members should be thanked and congratulated for their efforts!

Well done!

FABC ACTIVITIES DURING THE SENATE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

By John Ley

The context of our activities leading up to the election for ACT senators in October/November 2007 was:

■ After the 2004 election the Coalition gained a majority in the Senate enabling it to pass any legislation it wished without the need to obtain the support of any non-Coalition senator (except on the few occasions where a Coalition senator broke ranks to oppose the Government's legislation or particular parts of it). One bill passed abolished the long-standing and important position of staff-elected ABC board director, notwithstanding the strong opposition of the ALP and the Greens and the Friends of the ABC around Australia (the FABCs).

■ During Parliament's last term, in the view of the FABCs, the Coalition continued to underfund the ABC, continued to appoint to the Board people with views closely aligned to those of the Government, and did not rule out advertising on the ABC.

■ In 2006 Senator Humphries had publicly announced that he supported limited advertising on the ABC to boost its funding. Communications Minister Helen Coonan said before the election that the Government would consider any recommendation the Board might make after the election for advertising on the ABC. The ALP and the Greens had supported increased, ongoing (as opposed to ad hoc, short term) funding for the ABC, the return of the staff-elected Board director, an arms length appointment process for other Board directors and the principle of no commercial advertising on the ABC or its website.

In the FABC activities in the lead up to the election the FABC highlighted the differences in the respective policies of the Liberal Party on one hand and the ALP and Greens parties on the other.

Pamphlets were letter-boxed to a range of suburbs and Committee members and other FABC members attended and asked questions at a number of forums at which Senate candidates spoke on relevant issues, including those affecting the ABC. A number of stalls were staffed, also.

The outcome of the Senate election in the ACT was that there was a significant swing away from each of the major parties, particularly the sitting Coalition senator, Senator Humphries, and towards the Greens candidate.

FABC members are to be congratulated for their activity and enthusiasm during the election period.



AN INTERESTING COMPLAINT

By Ben Chaplin

Here is an interesting complaint made to the ABC by A Just Australia (who campaign for just policies and programs for refugees and asylum seekers).

A Just Australia was concerned about the reference to “illegal immigrants”, a phrase that immediately condemns asylum seekers to guilt.

This is a great example of a valid complaint that got results. It is important that someone out there cares about these sorts of issues, and that the ABC listens and takes actions over their mistakes.

THE COMPLAINT:

I am writing to you to make a complaint about an item that was broadcast on ABC TV news on 31st January 2008.

The item was a news story on Nauru that was introduced by the presenter with the following comment: "The tiny island nation of Nauru is facing an uncertain future now that Australia has abandoned the so-called Pacific Solution. The detention centre, which has housed some of Australia's illegal immigrants, is closing down and as Sean Dorney reports the local economy is losing an industry worth millions of dollars."

RESPONSE:

We received a letter in response acknowledging the error and stating that the newsreader has been counselled on the use of this term.

Thanks to A Just Australia for permission to print this.

www.ajustaustralia.com

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