

Additional Comments

Australian Greens

1.1 The ABC is a highly valued and trusted Australian institution. A 2010 Newspoll survey found that 88 per cent of Australians believe that the ABC provides a valuable service to the community. The number of submissions and form letters received by the committee in this inquiry reflect the degree of interest and concern felt by Australians about the future of “their” ABC.

1.2 In particular, Australians value the fact that the ABC is independent of political and commercial interests and is seen to be a trusted source of accurate news and information and a means of conveying Australian culture and identity, in all its diversity, to Australians.

1.3 Given the public standing of the ABC, and the significant amounts of public money invested in its continuing operations, it is understandable and fitting that the Australian public feels a sense of entitlement to scrutinise, understand and be consulted on the overall direction of the ABC and programming decisions that affect us all.

1.4 The ABC’s Charter encompasses expectations and tasks which require it to be almost “all things” to “all people”. In a climate where there is an increasing need for content to service an increasing number of channels and delivery modes, this is increasingly difficult to achieve. Indeed, the ABC’s funding for 2010/11 is 24.4 per cent less, in real terms, than what it received in 1985.¹ Much of the discussion in the course of the inquiry reflected the fact that the ABC could do so much more in fulfilling its Charter and public expectations if it were more adequately funded.

The degree of outsourcing of program making versus internal production

2.1 As reflected in the report, this issue emerged as key to the inquiry and the consensus was that a mixed production model was a necessary, and even desirable feature of modern broadcasting.

2.2 It is the balance to be struck between these sources of programming which must be carefully determined and, in the view of the Australian Greens, clearly articulated and communicated by ABC management to the Australian public.

2.3 It was submitted by some that the viewing or listening public was not overly concerned about who actually made the programs they enjoyed (the ABC itself, with a co-production or someone else entirely) and was often not able to differentiate. While

1 *ABC Annual Report, 2009/10, p.122.*

this may be true, evidence before the committee made it clear that the source of programming will affect many aspects of the ABC's future functioning if the balance is not struck appropriately.

2.4 On one hand, co-production enables a stretching of dollars through leveraging of funds available to the co-production partner and some of the best-loved programs which have featured on the ABC have been co-produced or purchased externally. Certainly, the involvement of outside program-makers can be a source of fresh ideas, vision and expertise.

2.5 On the other hand, the evidence before the committee pointed to the fact that an undue reliance on outsourcing runs the risk of:

- concern about commercial success and ratings and resale value on the part of production partners skewing decisions about content and a homogenous "commercial" voice;
- a loss of objectivity and independence in the commissioning of some work by interested institutions (such as performances or documentaries);
- a loss of diversity and regional content;
- reduced revenue from resale and the licensing of products;
- reduced control over intellectual property in the programs in the form of re-screening rights and use of archival material;
- loss of internal production capacity weakening bargaining power in negotiating purchase of content;
- loss of staff skills and corporate memory;
- loss of the capacity to train new/junior staff in broadcasting skills and in the ethic of public broadcasting; and
- failure to embrace or value the creativity, ideas and expertise of internal staff in the commissioning of new programs.

2.6 Certainly many of the submissions asserted that these effects are already in evidence.

2.7 We note with concern the evidence before the committee that over the past decade there has been a steady decline in the proportion of expenditure on internally produced content from 65 per cent (2001–02) to 45 per cent in 2010–11.² It is clear that outsourcing is proceeding apace at the ABC.

2.8 It would be highly damaging for the ABC to reach a point whereby it is merely a transmitter of other people's content (apart from News and Current Affairs content, which was outside the scope of this inquiry). It could lose its identity as a shaper and

2 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, answer to question on notice, p. 41, 26 September 2011 (received 1 October 2011), reproduced at Appendix 4.

custodian of Australian culture. It would be even more damaging if that content, as has been presaged in some of the submissions, was so similar to that provided by commercial broadcasters that there was little justification for continued funding by taxpayers.

2.9 The report (at paragraphs 3.35 to 3.39) discusses the ability of ABC staff to “pitch” ideas for new programming ideas. We note that a substantial number of the submissions to the inquiry asserted that staff were actively discouraged from offering or pursuing new program ideas to ABC management. We are concerned that this indicates a lack of respect for staff expertise and value, contributes to poor staff morale and deprives the ABC of a potentially rich source of creative ideas.

2.10 The Australian Greens regret the Committee's report, while presenting an accurate summary of the range of issues presented by witnesses, ultimately falls far short of turning this evidence into a focused set of recommendations.

Recommendation 1

2.11 The Australian Greens recommend that the ABC engage an external provider to conduct a performance and financial audit of the Television division's production commissioning model and to recommend ways to improve the transparency of the ABC's commissioning decisions, including an articulation of the willingness of ABC management to consider internal staff proposals for programming ideas.

Loss of internal arts production capacity

3.1 The Australian Greens are extremely concerned by the recent decision by ABC management to axe the TV *Art Nation* program with the likely redundancy of the 15 producers and researchers who make up the specialist TV Arts Unit. (The decision to cut the Radio National specialist arts program is a further cause for concern.)

3.2 The Arts in all their manifestations are a fundamentally important aspect of Australian cultural life and not well represented on commercial broadcasters. The Arts Unit has produced content which covers the gamut of arts including forms which are little discussed or featured in other media: design, installation art, musical theatre, photography, sculpture, street art and architecture – as well as visual and performing arts.

3.3 On the basis of the evidence before the committee, the likely effects of these decisions are:

- An inability to make regular, timely programs about the arts which involve objective commentary, reviews and critiques independent of the institutions, companies and individuals who make the art which is being portrayed;

- A decrease in the availability of content documenting Australia's diverse and regionally widespread arts scene – not only for TV but also radio and online broadcast:

The other significant contribution of the TV Arts unit is the content it provides for 'Arts Gateway'. In addition to Art Nation and Artscape stories, the Gateway will lose hundreds of items such as web extras, previews, photo galleries and blogs produced by the Arts unit.³

- A reduction in the ABC's rights to own and re-screen arts content and a concomitant reduction in the national archive of TV Arts material owned by the ABC which can then be used for retrospectives, obituaries and historical overviews.

3.4 It is our view that the ABC management decisions to axe *Art Nation* (and thereby the staff who currently produce it) will lead to a diminution in the ABC's capacity to fulfil its charter obligation to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia. The provision of arts broadcasting on the ABC also falls within the Charter obligations "to inform and entertain" and "reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community".

Recommendation 2

3.5 The Australian Greens recommend that ABC management reconsider its decision to axe its only TV arts magazine program and disband the television arts unit, and instead retain a team of specialist arts programmers for the creation and commissioning of quality arts content including critical, review type programming.

Recommendation 3

3.6 The Australian Greens recommends that the ABC adopt a mandated proportion of regional content on ABC television in order to meet its Charter obligation to 'reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community'.

3.7 We thank all those who demonstrated their concern about the future of the ABC by making submissions and giving up their time to appear as witnesses to the inquiry, including ABC staff and former staff, program makers from outside the ABC, interested commentators, members of the public and ABC management.

Senator Ludlam

Senator Wright

3 CPSU, *Submission 145*, para 88.