

SUBMISSION ON BEHALF OF ABC FRIENDS NATIONAL

TO THE SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION
COMMITTEE

We wish to submit the following issues for your committee members considering

- The Inquiries into the ABC Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017 and the ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional) Measures Bill 2017

ABC Friends National constitutes representatives of all States committed to independence in public broadcasting as fundamental to the effective functioning of Australian democracy. We work to maintain ABC services as set down in its Charter for the benefit of all sections of the community throughout the country.

1. Regarding the ABC Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017 we submit the following comments
 - ABC FRIENDS NATIONAL supports the view of the ABC Managing Director, Ms Guthrie that there is no need to change Charter. We believe that in the current climate of political and media attack on the independence of the public broadcaster, attempts would be made to constrain the role of the ABC.
 - We are concerned that the proposed Bill uses the same terms “fair “and “impartial” as originally adopted by U.S. Fox News but subsequently discarded. We consider that the term “balance” presents editorial decision makers with unrealistic expectations which are not in the interests of independent news reporting. For example, does this mean the ABC must give equal coverage to Holocaust and Climate Change deniers or determine to offer greater recognition of professional research? Clearly the ABC’s FACT CHECK initiative offered appropriate monitoring and should be widely used across all areas of public broadcasting.
 - Furthermore, we submit that it is not Government’s role to dabble in editorial decision making by trying to legislate for so called “balance” The ABC has a demonstrable commitment to high standards of journalism and broadcasting and does not need interference from politicians, often motivated by personal or party opinions that are not necessarily in the public interest. Australians rely on their public broadcaster to present news, current affairs and all Information professionally, which is why the ABC is one of our most trusted public institutions.
 - The Government acts as trustees of the ABC in the public interest, but because of the electoral cycle does not have continuity in oversight of public broadcasting. Therefore,

guaranteed independence rests with the ABC Charter, its Board and Management and should not become a political plaything.

2. Regarding the ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017 we submit the following

ABC FRIENDS submitted detailed comment to the ABC Broadcasting Amendment (Rural and Regional Services) Bill 2015 so that submission continues to reflect our commitment to ABC service provision throughout the country. Furthermore in 2016 and 2017 we made ongoing representations to government and the ABC opposing the arbitrary removal of ABC shortwave services in the Northern Territory and the Pacific.

The ABC ANNUAL Report 2017 indicates that

“We have demonstrated our commitment to serving rural and regional Australia with our biggest single investment-\$15 million a year will be spent on providing more reporters and content makers, better tools and expanded video output. We are well on the way to recruiting 80 new content roles in regional Australia within eighteen months”

Furthermore, the selection of Board Members should be based on relevant expertise and understanding of the role and history of the Australian public broadcaster not where they currently reside. Responsible Board Members will offer their professional guidance and respective skills to assist management in fulfilling the requirements of the ABC Charter. We do not consider that merely living in a particular area of Australia necessarily equips a Board Member to interpret and advise on a wide range of policy directions in a complex media environment.

We understand the ABC Advisory Committee already constitutes a broad cross section of representatives from all states, so we believe this entity is already fulfilling a role in reflecting issues from around Australia.

There is a clear double standard of policy direction when this Amendment Bill coincides with commercial media reducing their coverage of regional and rural Australia with the tacit support of Government which has recently given a financial boost in the form of no license fees. In addition, the commercial sector is allowed to offer less children's and country wide coverage. Yet the ABC is expected to absorb major financial cutbacks while maintaining 48 regional centres around the country.

We wish to advise that our organisation is happy to provide further comment or detail on behalf of our members and supporters numbering about 45,000.

With thanks

Margaret Reynolds

National President ABC Friends

Prepared with the assistance of Ranald Macdonald, National Media Adviser to ABC Friends.