

Forty Degrees South-Opinion Piece by Margaret Reynolds on behalf of Friends of the ABC Tasmania

What is the Future for ABC Television Production in Tasmania?

It was refreshing to hear a genuine tripartisan debate in the Tasmanian Parliament recently. The occasion was a Matter of Public Importance discussion about the need to support ABC television production in Tasmania.

Greens Minister for Human Services; Cassy O'Connor initiated this opportunity to place on the public record the vital importance of ABC regional television production in reflecting the state's local identity through drama, documentary and coverage of sport and local events. The Minister was supported by Labor Premier, Lara Giddings and her ministerial colleague David O Byrne, as well as Liberal members Michael Ferguson and Elise Archer and Greens Member Paul O Halloran.

In their speeches they all praised the contribution of the ABC, the need to protect Tasmanian jobs, the significance of local content and the role of ABC professionals in mentoring young filmmakers. Some parliamentarians recalled childhood memories of iconic "Play School" or the "Science for School" programs while others reminded us how national audiences had applauded "Gardening Australia" and "Collectors"

Why were these Tasmanian elected representatives in such agreement about spending nearly an hour of parliamentary time debating the importance of local ABC television production? What had created such a spirit of cooperation and unanimous support?

There is increasing disquiet about the future of ABC television production in regional Australia. Sydney based decision makers appear to have decided on a new direction which would see the ABC concentrate television production of drama, documentary and general entertainment in Melbourne and Sydney where a majority of programs would be outsourced to major film companies. Only news and limited current affairs programs would be generated from regional areas but with the loss of specialist professionals and equipment, even this level of local content could be jeopardised.

Over the last few years there has been a continual decline in ABC production in Tasmania. Firstly the move of "Gardening Australia" to Sydney and then the decision to end the "Collectors". **The new program "Auction Room" continues the good work of the Tasmanian ABC production team but these professionals could develop more Tasmanian based programs if given the opportunity. It seems the ABC does not recognise the potential of its local staff in the rush to centralise television production.**

A recent Senate Enquiry has recommended that regional production should continue but there has been no official response to date.

Why does this matter to Tasmania?

The downgrading of local television production and broadcasting capacity will lead to

- a loss of ABC jobs in direction, editorial, camera, sound, archives and support functions
- no coverage by the ABC of local sport
- limited coverage of local events
- young filmmakers will lose career paths and mentors.
- the local screen industry will lose key professionals and opportunities to work in partnership with the ABC which will result in a loss of local talent as filmmakers are obliged to move interstate.

“Friends of the ABC “(Tasmania) has been active in trying to prevent this significant change of policy and in asserting the need for Tasmanians to be consulted about the direction of “Our ABC “.

In March we hosted a Public Forum in Parliament House which brought together a large audience to hear well known ABC presenter and former ABC Board Member Quentin Dempster outline the current risks to local ABC television production. At the Forum we initiated a major letter writing campaign and through the “Friends of the ABC” website, www.fabctas.org.au we can track the **number** of letters this concern has generated.

A large volume of letters **has** been written to Federal and State Members of Parliament, to the ABC Board and to new ABC Chairman, James Spigelman urging a review of this disturbing trend towards centralization of program content. **We want to see protection of regional interests as specified in the ABC Charter. We want to hear from the new Chairman and his Board of Management rather than from ABC public relations spokesmen.**

In April “Friends of the ABC (Tasmania) joined with the Commonwealth Public Sector Union (CPSU) to organize a Day of Action at the State Parliament. We were able to hear the strong level of support in the Matter of Public Importance debate and meet with a number of local members. We urged the Premier and Leaders of the Greens and Liberals to jointly sponsor an invitation to ABC Chairman James Spigelman requesting he visit Tasmania to discuss the future of ABC television production in the state.

In May the campaign was extended to the Salamanca Market where people are eager to get involved in protecting “Our ABC” Many people are concerned that ABC 1 and 2 are too dependent on British programs that could be made locally. Whether it is lifestyle, science or nature programs, the ABC increasingly relies on the BBC and Channel 4. Clearly ABC viewers appreciate some overseas content but surely we can achieve a better balance by producing more programs from a distinctly Australian perspective.

The ABC Budget does not reveal detail of how much it spends importing British programs nor the income the ABC generates through the sale of British material in ABC

shops. But it is worth asking whether at least some of this revenue could be redirected into the production of more local content from regional Australia. Indeed we need to challenge the ABC to explain just how it allocates expenditure within the organisation to uphold its Charter obligations.

“Friends of the ABC “(Tasmania) need your support to question the current direction of ABC television production. We want answers to the many questions asked by staff and viewers about the way in which the ABC is setting its priorities and spending taxpayer dollars.

You can find out more by visiting our website

www.fabctas.org.au

Margaret Reynolds