

Personal submission to the Senate Inquiry into

## **The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity**

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Personal Submission (not confidential) by

(Ms.) Austra Maddox

### **Terms of Reference**

That the following matter be referred to the Environment and Communications References Committee for inquiry and report:

- (a) the commitment by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia;
- (b) the impact that the increased centralisation of television production in Sydney and Melbourne has had on the ABC's ability to reflect national identity and diversity; and
- (c) any related matters.

### **Background comments :**

I am making this submission for several reasons :

- (a) Firstly as a citizen who regards the A.B.C. as having an unique role, and therefore unique responsibility, in providing Australians with quality national broadcasting content;
- (b) Secondly as an ex-union official who has had intimate dealings with internal A.B.C. issues and the carriage of many significant disputes over a long period of time under a number of different governments and different heads of the A.B.C.;
- (c) Thirdly, as a response to recent A.B.C. management decisions in relation to production staffing in Tasmania; and
- (d) Finally, as a long term member of the Friends of the A.B.C., the community based organization which provides a structured voice for community comment on matters pertaining to the A.B.C..

My submission refers to all areas of the Terms of Reference of this committee. I have therefore structured my submission under the headings provided by those Terms of Reference.

### **(a) the commitment by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (A.B.C.) to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia :**

I think it is most disappointing that A.B.C. Management has demonstrated a continuing lack of commitment to its Charter in this respect.

Particularly in Tasmania, but I am aware of not dissimilar issues in other states at times, we have often been faced with actual cuts and threatened cuts to local production (and associated staff). This has been the case even when Tasmania has produced nationally recognized programmes (e.g. children's shows back in the 1980s and later "*Gardening Australia*").

Over the years I have been involved in disputes ranging from cuts to local newsroom capacity, general production capacity, down-grading of Tasmania as a separate management unit, and out-sourcing of local production. All of these I would describe as being largely based on narrow budgetary concerns and a growing culture of control and centralization at senior levels of management. This has been exacerbated by a lack of transparency in actual spending, with

management hiding behind “commercial in confidence” provisions that properly should not apply to a national public broadcaster.

We have often been successful in prosecuting these industrial campaigns (e.g. under David Hill's “leadership” we fought off attempts to down-grade regional news coverage - not only in Tasmania but elsewhere) in part due to our highlighting Charter requirements to provide regional diversity. However, of course, we also lost some disputes due to stronger budgetary and/or political pressures, to the detriment of the A.B.C.'s longer-term capacity to provide that regional diversity.

No thinking person who takes an interest in the A.B.C. would be unaware of the different pressures that A.B.C. management have been subject to over recent years – both political and budgetary. The A.B.C. has had a very difficult task at times in balancing these pressures. What is disappointing in management's response, however, is that a culture of cost-cutting and centralization has developed rather than a genuine internal re-thinking of priorities within the framework of its Charter. It is heart-breaking to see staff who are genuinely committed to the A.B.C.'s Charter being consistently under-mined by management decisions, both small and large.

What is needed to redress this is stronger legislation which limits political interference and which guarantees funding levels in both percentage and absolute terms where relevant.

Taking Tasmania as a case study in terms of representing regional diversity, A.B.C. management's response to external budgetary pressures has been to see Tasmania as an “optional extra”. As such it is seen as potentially a source of extra funds to be applied elsewhere in the organization; furthermore this is often in relation to priorities which do not necessarily enhance its role as a *national* public broadcasting body.

Without local production capacity there is no guarantee of local input, no capacity for quick response to regional issues and local cultural changes, and no effective local/regional input to the establishment of balanced programming which includes genuine regional diversity. *Increasingly A.B.C. management appears to have taken on the mind-set of a commercial organization which sees the Charter as a limiting factor rather than a blue-print for planning.*

The A.B.C. often points to its Advisory bodies as an answer to criticisms about any such regional issues. The fact is that these bodies are widely regarded as totally ineffectual, poorly informed, and not involved in any serious level of debate within the A.B.C. about either budgetary matters or broader internal cultural issues. This is illustrated for us locally by a recent talk to Friends of the A.B.C. by an advisory body member who appeared to know nothing about the local production cuts announced just a few days later. This is in no way meant to be a criticism of any individual member of those advisory bodies, but it does highlight how they are not integral to any proper planning process. I have no doubt that most members of those bodies are well motivated and public-spirited citizens, who are then often disillusioned by the lack of meaningful involvement. It is just not good enough for management to attempt to paint those bodies as something that they are not in an attempt to fudge the more serious issue of priority planning.

(b) the impact that the increased centralisation of television production in Sydney and Melbourne has had on the ABC's ability to reflect national identity and diversity;

It has often been noted, particularly by the C.P.S.U. as the relevant national union with coverage of A.B.C. staff, that apart from the issues mentioned in my submission under the preceding heading that centralization of television production has a negative impact on the commercial sector as well.

In the past regional training of production staff meant that local expertise was developed. A.B.C.-trained staff often later trained commercial sector staff or went to that sector themselves. Whilst obviously the A.B.C. does not have a formal responsibility to contribute to the private sector in this way, the fact is that the lack of skilled staff at the regional level results in reduced capacity to produce and provide regional programme within both sectors.

It is ironic that whilst elsewhere in the world there is a growing recognition of the importance of regional identity, the A.B.C. seems to be headed towards a “blandifying” centralized model of operation which has no guarantee of any genuine regional input, regional production, or appropriate representation of regional identity.

The dis-mantling of regional infra-structure is not only a serious issue in the short-term, but obviously becomes a major limiting factor into the future. As an example I would cite the O.B. (Outside Broadcasting) Van facility which is used for outdoor events and as a studio support facility. Without such infra-structure there is NO capacity to cover outdoor events in any serious way. This not only denies Tasmanians appropriate coverage of regional events, but also means that Tasmanian identity does not get exposure at the national level. Australia is a homogeneous country in some respects, and this is largely to be applauded; however, there are significant regional differences which are an integral part of the broader national identity and these need to be acknowledge and celebrated. Current A.B.C. policy does not recognize the significant gap that they are creating in this respect.

(c) any related matters and Summary :

A.B.C. management has demonstrated a lack of commitment to the concepts of regional production and regional diversity over a long period of time, as illustrated by some examples cited above. Unfortunately there are many more such examples. This has been a cumulative process for which the A.B.C. has not been effectively called to account.

What is needed in my opinion is action based on the following points :

- A.B.C. management must be held accountable for decisions made – at present it seems to act as a law unto itself, with poor decisions masked by spurious claims for the need for “commercial in confidence” provisions;
- Both short-term and long-term priorities need to be publicly assessed against the requirements of the Charter;
- Government funding should be specifically linked to those priorities, with tighter reporting requirements imposed which would enable proper scrutiny of funding decisions;
- Funding levels should be guaranteed in both percentage and absolute terms where relevant;
- The A.B.C. should be directed to develop an effective and public policy document on regional production and regional diversity, detailing how it intends to address these needs in concrete terms – i.e. not just a bland policy statement but an actual plan incorporating regional production resources, etc.. This policy document should be the subject of public

consultations at all levels. Such a process would help re-establish the A.B.C.'s identity as a genuine national public broadcaster and not just the pseudo-commercial operation that it seems to be headed towards.

I hope that this Senate inquiry will be able to address some of these issues and help make the A.B.C. what it is intended to be – a genuine national public broadcaster which adheres to its Charter and provides coverage of regional diversity based on regional production capacity.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak to these points at any public hearings that the Inquiry holds.

Austra Maddox.  
18<sup>th</sup>. January 2013.