

Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions

I want to voice my opposition to the continuing dumbing down of the ABC. As one of the TV producers to fall victim to the latest round of internal production destruction, I have a vested interest in the ongoing outsourcing agenda of Kim Dalton and Mark Scott not being fulfilled. But my opposition goes way beyond self interest and I have reluctantly accepted impending loss of a job I love, do well and continue to work hard at.

My concern is for the long-term future of public broadcasting in this country. Almost every one of the independent producers and on-air talent now being courted by Mr Dalton and co had their start through the ABC. Without that training they would not be capable of the roles they're now fulfilling. With the outsourcing of internal production, where will the next wave of expertise come from?

The ownership of intellectual property is another casualty of this short-sighted outsourcing agenda. The ABC's archives are a treasure trove of our nation's history, and in high demand from external producers seeking historical footage. Not only do externally produced programs not contribute to these archives (as the copyright on footage resides with those producers, and not the ABC), but the potential to generate revenue through the sale of DVDs and related merchandise is also lost.

The current job losses come on top of a steady wind-down of internal production that's seen, among other things, the entire Education TV unit here in Adelaide dismantled in 2005. This unit was highly regarded by educators around the country as a source of teaching material to use in support of school curriculums. Many programs produced by this unit are still going to air and still being used within schools, but they are dated and will eventually be obsolete, with nothing to replace them.

Kim Dalton repeatedly makes the claim that 84% of ABC TV production remains internal. This is a misrepresentation of the facts. Can you please ask Mr Dalton to define what he would class as an internal production? A cursory look at ABC programs quickly establishes that the figure of 84% in no way means that 84% of TV programs currently going to air on the ABC were made using 100% ABC staff and facilities, though those hearing Mr Dalton's claim could be forgiven for believing it does. Is he, for example, including repeats in that statistic?

The ABC is currently falling victim to the ideology of a handful of people at the top lead by Mr Dalton. His background within the independent production sector and allegiance to the outdated Thatcher model for economic rationalism goes a large way to explaining his ongoing actions. He appears to have the support of an ABC board that is also strongly connected to the independent production sector; Director Cheryl Bart is the current SA Film Corporation Chair, Director Steven Skala is a former Chair of Film Australia and Director Michael Lynch is on the board of Film Victoria.

I fully acknowledge the need for the independent production sector to have airtime on the ABC. I agree that their contributions add to the diversity of programming required to sustain audiences, both on air and online. But in losing producers such as me the ABC is wasting years of training and experience paid for by Australian taxpayers. The TV Production Unit in Adelaide has a proven track record for producing quality, entertaining factual programs. Our combined skill-set can be transposed to an infinite variety of topics and - with all the resources under the one roof – production is streamlined and highly efficient.

Yet Mr Dalton has decided the SA Film Corporation should be the one making the ABC's programs here in Adelaide. As a result, the 80x 30min *'Talking Heads'* programs our unit produced over two years (*see note below) will be replaced by just 12 programs (produced over two years) under the SAFC "Factory" initiative. In light of this fact, can you please ask Mr Dalton how the SAFC initiative is more cost effective?

In the last couple of years ABC TV management has refused to allow internal producers to pitch ideas for future series. It's not a case of the playing field being uneven. We have not even been allowed on to the playing field. Instead we were advised to find an independent producer we liked and get them to pitch the series to the ABC, and hope that if it was taken on then we would be included in the production team. It is a clearly flawed model. Independent production companies understandably want to use their own staff – not ABC staff. And they certainly do not require the services of an ABC TV producer and nor are they contractually required to do so. So why, as an ABC producer, would I risk giving my ideas to an external company that could then run with them without me? It was a model that I believe was set up to fail as part of Mr Dalton's plan to gut internal production.

Mr Dalton repeatedly stresses the financial advantages of outsourcing production. I dispute this and ask that the Committee seek copies of the Bowen Inquiry that looked into the case of internal versus external production. My understanding is that internal production was found to be more beneficial.

I would also appreciate the committee examining what Mr Dalton's plan is for ABC production when the current state and federal government handouts to independent production companies dry up. With ever-increasing airtime and websites to fill, where will

all those new programs come from then? It would be timely to examine whether the ABC (like its commercial counterparts) should now also have a quota for Australian content to ensure our cultural identity isn't drowned in a sea of foreign buy-ins.

The full extent of the damage this outsourcing is doing is still to be revealed. If the current trajectory continues, what ABC viewers will be left with is a programming schedule that seems intent on copying trends on commercial TV, and copying them long after their audience appeal has expired.

When we asked what kind of programs the ABC should be making (in the aftermath of the axing of *Talking Heads*,), the commercial series cited by TV management as an example of the kind of program we should be striving to make was "Bondi Rescue".

Is highly contrived reality TV really what ABC audiences want or deserve? The point of difference that the ABC offered over commercial TV (being quality programs that question, inspire, provoke, entertain and inform) is under sustained attack. This is not a debate about an elitist intellectual minority seeking high-brow programs that alienate large numbers of viewers. The ABC should try to cater for as broad a range of viewer tastes as possible. Instead ABC programming seems to be increasingly taken in a direction that underestimates the intelligence of its audience, and in doing so insults it.

In closing, I hope this Inquiry shines a powerful spotlight on the motives and reasoning driving those that are overseeing the end of internal program making. They will only be in charge of the ABC for a short time, but their legacy will be enduring and probably irreversible.

(**Talking Heads* was a popular series hosted by ABC personality Peter Thompson. Among the people he interviewed were Scott Hicks, Collette Dinnigan, Ita Buttrose, Les Murray, Cathy Freeman, James Morrison, Olivia Newton-John, Father Bob Maguire, Lisa Gasteen and Paul Grabowsky. Despite being buried in a 6:30pm timeslot, it rated well and was the only remaining ABC series that documented the lives of significant Australians.)