

9 January 2018

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

**Inquiries into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment
(Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017**

I write in support of the proposed changes to the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* to better reflect the perspectives, needs and views of rural and regional Australia. Fundamentally, this Bill acknowledges the importance of the ABC's corporate governance, and that in order to have an ABC that reflects all of Australia, the ABC must represent all of Australia.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has, in the past, displayed what I consider grave errors of judgement, and *prima facie* or specious ingenuousness when making broadcasting choices that may affect rural and regional Australia. Two examples are the decision to air the Four Corners story that effectively crippled the live export trade, the second is to cease shortwave radio transmission.

The Four Corners story was made on the basis of video footage later acknowledged as contrived, and not the normal practice at the Indonesian abattoir at which it was filmed. The actions, omissions and procedures used at that particular abattoir during the contrived filming were not normal, nor were they endorsed, sanctioned, approved or condoned by any Australian or Indonesian body. The poor quality of the journalism was eventually exposed as facts surrounding the footage were uncovered, but by then the damage was done: live exports of beef cattle were suspended. Road trains of cattle en route to the ship loaders had to be diverted. Accumulation depots were already full. Yards of cattle on properties in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland had to be let go. Truck drivers, helicopter pilots, stockmen, camp cooks and grader drivers worked for days if not weeks, only to be unpaid because the job did not come through.

Terminating shortwave radio broadcasts to rural and regional Australia so as to redirect funding to improving services in capital cities and for international audiences is unfathomable. Shortwave radio

was the only way an audience could be reached if they were moving throughout northern South Australia, eastern Western Australia, western Queensland, and the vast majority of the land mass of the Northern Territory. The broadcast characteristics of shortwave radio make it possible to reach an extraordinary distance, far beyond the capabilities of AM, FM, mobile (cellular) networks, and terrestrial television, which signals are not transmitted beyond townships such as Alice Springs or Darwin. Insisting radio broadcast signals could be exchanged for a VAST system is laughable, and shows how little the ABC understand about the transmission of their own content, their audiences, and their fundamental place within Australian society. The ABC effectively removed the only media option for those in the outback in order to fund yet another option for those with many options already: one shortwave radio station was removed for an audience without a choice, in order to fund digital radio expansion in Hobart, Darwin and Canberra, where AM, FM, and terrestrial TV all offer multiple stations, in addition to the reliable internet connections via the mobile telephone or cable networks that offer almost unlimited content.

Shifting funding from servicing remote, rural and regional Australians, to increasing services to international audiences indicates the already most disconnected and marginalised Australians are easily discarded, forgotten about by the ABC until there is a slow news day which frees up a reporter to travel to a cattle station with an adventurer, or to an aboriginal community for a feel good story about a soon-to-be-abandoned art centre project.

That the ABC is so disconnected from the reality of those in the bush is alarming. Being advised by the ABC's Managing Director Ms Guthrie, when the ABC held a Community Forum in Alice Springs in July 2017, to "just access content on the ABC app" indicates that there is zero understanding of the lifestyles, infrastructure and resources available to people living in the outback. The NBN Sky Muster service is heavily over-subscribed, and data transfer speeds are consequently so bad that on some days email access is impossible, let alone content streaming. Furthermore, content streaming can only happen when connected to the internet, which generally only happens in buildings or stationary vehicles.

Amending the ABC's Charter such that two non-executive directors must be appointed on the basis of their involvement with rural and regional Australia should help restore the balance back to the bush. The city-centric journalism and service development focus is not fair to those not in the city; the geographic identities that make up Australia are being lost. Augmenting the processes by which the ABC delivers its services to better reflect and provide for rural and regional Australia is a positive step towards proper and legitimate representation of Australia as a whole. Establishing a Regional Advisory Council for the benefit of informing the ABC Board is a worthy cause, as long as it doesn't become another well-intended but superficial entity. The Regional Advisory Council's intended mandate, and the Bill's annual reporting obligation changes appear to make the provision of factual, objective data imperative to the ABC's successful transition into an accurate and wholly representative organisation.

The arrival of the changes proposed by the Bill should not interfere with the often high integrity, probing, informed and well researched journalism, as long as the rare missteps like the Four Corners episode become ever rarer. The same can be said of the general entertainment content. What is important is that the voices outside the cities are heard, and broadcast across the nation. The ABC

must strive to represent all of Australia, which it will find easier to do when all of Australia represents the ABC.

I consider the Bill to be an appropriate first step to reconnecting rural and regional Australia with the cities and the ABC. However, given the vast area of the country that is considered “remote” as opposed to “regional” or “rural”, I propose the Bill include a reference to “remote” Australia to ensure the representation of remote Australians in both content and service delivery. Adapting the ABC’s Charter to ensure the acknowledgement of the existence of all Australians is fundamental to the ABC’s success as a truly national broadcaster.

Yours sincerely,

James Christian