

Submission to Senate Committee on the ABC

This submission proposes that inherent in the establishment of the ABC is a notion that citizens have a right to be appropriately informed. A right that I say is at the heart of democratic theory, right up there with liberty because uninformed choice is no choice at all. Further, that meeting this obligation to citizens is the overall purpose of the ABC and that this should guide not only the interpretation of relevant existing legislation and consequential guidelines, but also necessary community debate about the future of our political system.

The key rationale for this proposition is that the ABC acts as a guide to the behaviour of the other media outlets in Australia. By dint of this influence, the ABC has an effect on political outcomes and hence national welfare that is far greater than indicated by the proportion of Australians that are its audience. In short, because the ABC influences those who influence, it has a critical leveraged role in the welfare of the nation that needs to be as effectively protected from partisan bias as is possible.

The architects of political systems have always sought to protect against the unfairness that is part of human behaviour. The advent of mass media has revealed human behaviour that the architects of current systems didn't predict. However, change that seeks to moderate the power of a group as powerful as the media needs very wide support before its feasible. Without publicly owned media fostering impartial debate change is impossible, yet it's both essential and challenging.

Just as we would want the bravest and smartest warriors leading us in war, so too we need the political debate about how the contest for sovereign power is conducted to leverage the talents of our best and brightest. When the ABC was formed the American experience was that the concentrated power of the media was a corrupting influence. The Australian democracy saw this and chose to have an elite, non-commercial counter to that corrupting force. This points to an underlying purpose for the ABC and it is reflected in the three main duties of the ABC Board viz; (authors underline)

- a) to ensure that the functions of the Corporation are performed efficiently and with the maximum benefit to the people of Australia;
- b) to maintain the independence and integrity of the Corporation;
- c) to ensure that the gathering and presentation by the Corporation of news and information is accurate and impartial according to the recognized standards of objective journalism;

The job of reacting to forces that distort our political system is logically a higher order national interest than the contest for power itself. It is relevant here that the Senate is designed to be less beholden to the contest for power by dint of longer terms. In the last few decades what Political Scientists define as partisanship, that is the inclination of citizens to be committed to voting for one political party, has reduced in all the major democracies. This makes political instability more likely because it makes political contests likely to be decided by a higher proportion of non-partisan voters. This is problematic because the membership of political parties has dropped dramatically and they are now more representative of people who seek power than ever before. Furthermore, this is happening at a time when wise long-term policy making by governments has become a global urgency. The need for a vehicle for our best and brightest to inform the nation has never been greater.

Overwhelmingly the evidence is that the most non-partisan voters are less involved, less informed and likely to be influenced by advertising that engages with their emotions, typically not long before they vote. This effectively makes the contest for sovereign power decided by advertising and PR campaigns – the same corrupting force that the ABC's freedom from commercial influence is meant to counter.

We know from the experience of advertising experts and also from the study of the human brain, that emotions are much more powerful motivators than reason. Our history of success as a nation is based upon the disciplined focus our forbears placed upon reason. Indeed, the most successful nations around the world over the last two centuries are clearly the ones that place the highest value on reason. Yet, we allow our political system to be dominated by the commercial pragmatism that it's OK to misrepresent in order to sell stuff.

This is not an argument against selling stuff or indeed the notion that commercial competition is a powerful force for good in fostering equity in how resources are utilised and wealth is distributed. It is rather an argument about the need to adequately foster competition between ideas in order to continue the success of our culture.

I have tried to make arguments similar to what is contained here in the ABC Drum site. It would be unfair of me to claim editorial bias because my articles were not published, but it is more telling that the moderator disallowed comments I made to the site when it appeared that just about any comment was being allowed. (ref; Article by Scott MacInness 23rd Aug 2011 – see notes). My strong suspicion is that what has motivated the exclusion of my comments is associated with a broad shift towards populism that the ABC has taken. It seems likely that just as the editorial approach on the Drum is about fostering outrage, and thus maximise the number of comments (much the way tabloid newspapers foster alarm in order to sell copies), so too Art Nation may be a victim of populism. Neither the Drum nor Art Nation are core elements of the ABC, but they are places where there is evidence of an overall policy of populism that is not explicit and open to public scrutiny.

The insight our forbears had to try to exclude commercial bias and populism from the ABC could be seen in the same idealised way that Americans view their founders' zeal for liberty. The Americans didn't intend that the right to liberty would mean that deception and distortion could be used to sell everything from youth to religion (apologies to Jackson Browne), but they treasure it as an ideal of national identity nevertheless.

I urge the Senate to reflect deeply on the need to protect Australia's democratic ideals from media populism. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to elaborate on my view that the caustic effects of a populist media can be greatly reduced by systemic change without compromising any of the ideals our democracy is based upon.

Malcolm Mummery

31st August 2011

Notes:

Comment made on Drum article:

It is good to see these fundamentals in print. As it happens an interview with Rob Oakeshott was put up last night that addresses exactly this question -

<http://theconversation.edu.au/oakeshott-on-the-treason-of-party-discipline-2827>

My take is that the genie is out of the bottle and we will need to fix the political system to get an adequate mechanism to militate against populists who exploit the least interested and least informed voters. My reasoning is that for more than a generation we have given tacit approval to the notion that it's OK to misrepresent in order to sell things. This has eroded the ethical foundation that the architects of our political system assumed would be in place and what we now have is a corruption that they would not have tolerated.

It's not hard to design, or for that matter implement, changes that will act against the exploitation of populism, but first we need debate. That debate needs to be aimed at reaching a reasoned and appropriate consensus. If this article is evidence that the DRUM is no longer just fostering outrage by publishing unreasoned and inflammatory nonsense to encourage response, then we are heading in the right direction.

Drum article the above comment was made about:

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/2851634.html>