

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

Re: Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity [in-light of the decision by ABC MD Mark Scott to close the Hobart Production Unit.]

Dear Secretary

I am one of those directly affected by the decision of ABC management to close the Tasmania ABC TV Production Unit. While I personally see this as one of the more short-sighted and calamitous decisions made by ABC management, I believe it raises much larger and more important ideological and philosophical questions.

Over the years many media commentators have observed that a country as geographically large as Australia, with its relatively small population; cannot afford too not have a public broadcaster. Previous Federal governments strongly believed this and ABC radio (1932) and later ABC TV (1956) were established to ensure that this was so.

For a public broadcaster to be effective it needs to be properly funded and politically independent. It also needs to maintain its primacy by ensuring its relevance to its audience. That includes the majority of Australians, those who live outside of Sydney or Melbourne. Regional Australians!

While the ABC Charter attempts to ensure this notion of regional diversity, recent history shows the charter to be seen as little more than a vague mission statement that ABC management acknowledge or ignore, depending on whether or not it suits their purposes.

As with most purges of employee's, the proposed dismantling of ABC Tasmania's Production Unit is one justified by technological and financial reasons that disguise fundamental ideological and philosophical changes to the institution publicly acknowledged as one of Australia's most valued.

The mixed model of internal (ABC produced) and external productions (co-productions) publicly championed by ABC MD Mark Scott makes perfectly good sense. Why then aren't we pursuing it? Mr Scott has also regularly stated that 75% of current content (excluding local sport, News, Current Affairs and *Rage*) would be produced internally. This is total obfuscation and requires serious examination. Is an internal program one with some ABC production involvement and an external program one with no ABC involvement? That would make a co-production internal and a program totally bought-in an external one. The Hobart Production Unit has been declared surplus to requirements because even without it, the publicly promulgated 75% internal production can be met! Whatever the semantics, when the smoke

clears, internal production capability will be non-existent in Tasmania. The same fate already metered out to regional ABC-TV in Brisbane, Perth and Darwin.

Manager Television Kim Dalton's claim that he could make three times as much television for the same money through co-productions with independent production companies is disingenuous. It fails to recognise the revenue stream that in-house productions have created for the ABC as owners of the intellectual rights to programs. This applies to complete programs/series or as archival footage sales. The encouragement of other State based film funding bodies to also invest in these co-productions further impacts on the public purse. The ABC saves money, but every one else pays a little more. Competing agendas/markets/sales of the various investors further complicates matters making it harder to ensure that programs are made that enhance the recognition and preserve the trust of the ABC brand. Co-producers may see the ABC as the first to purchase their program; but definitely not the last.

I concur with the other respondents who have eloquently addressed the wider questions of regional v national identity and the importance of regional production and the primacy of strong regional content in a public broadcaster. I also note the thumb-nail history of the Hobart ABC Branch and the strength of its desire to be proactive in ensuring a viable and relevant future. The argument that as a Production Unit we are too expensive (at \$1.5 million a year) and that the technology overhaul needed to upgrade both the Outside Broadcast Van and production resources and facilities in Hobart is too large a capital expenditure for 'a market as small as Tasmania'. Especially when the only short-run series on our production schedule (*Auction Room*) was no longer require.

As a Producer /Director working in a regional branch I have been required to work on a wide range of program types: I spent 15 years working on *Gardening Australia*, I made Natural History programs such as *Richard Morecroft Goes Wild – Tasmania: Sanctuary or Trap*, as well as the perennial *ANZAC Day Coverage*. I made content for programs such as *The Arts Show*, *George Negus Tonight*, *Talking Heads*, *Can We Help?* and many others. I worked on *Collectors* from day one to the end of its seventh and final season and came back from extended leave just as production of *Auction Room* commenced.

The two long term programs I had worked on, *Gardening Australia* and *Collectors* had allowed us high levels of autonomy in deciding the content, look and ethos of the programs. While we never promoted the fact that the programs were made out of Tasmania, both were strongly Tasmanian-centric. This obviously struck a chord with our audiences and they voted with their remote controls. Both programs also traded on the strengths of a regional branch. Longer-run series amortise production costs and provide a work flow that can take full advantage of a small, cohesive, capable production team. The Tasmanian branch of ABC - TV was held up as the model for creative, efficient, cost effective program making. The constant program demands allowed program makers and operators to very quickly hone their skills, working on more demanding and longer form programs. It created true career paths for those lucky enough to gain employment with the ABC. Many of whom have achieved international recognition.

It also allowed many mentoring and work experience opportunities and input from the wider Tasmanian media community. But contrary to Mr Scott's assertion, we were not making programs for the 'small Tasmanian market', we were making programs for the network. A quick but not comprehensive look at our average production output over the last ten years shows we made in excess of 24 hours of national television per year

*Auction Room* came with a personal assurance from ABC-TV MD Mark Scott that an audience of 330,000 (in a 6.00 pm Sunday time-slot) would ensure the programs survival. We only exceeded this figure once, ironically the last program rated 343,313 (Consolidated Data 5 City Metro). The hurdle had been set, but was it set unfairly high? There was a feeling in the Production Unit that we, and the program, had been set up to fail from day one.

On the 21/1/2010 when MD Mark Scott announced plans to launch the ABC 24 hour news channel it was claimed it would be funded by efficiencies. The 30% budget cuts across all genres that ABC 24 engendered, effectively spelt the end of ABC-TV regional internal production. It appeared the level of public funding granted the ABC could sustain News 24, or regional production, but not both.

If there is indeed a strong commitment to Public Broadcasting in this country MD Mark Scott's previous disregard to Senate Committee recommendations is to be applauded. The ABC should be able to exercise political independence. However that is only one side of the dichotomy. The slow quieting of regional Australian voices and the dismantling of the means to ensure that this can happen is a huge concern and one on which I note previous Senate Inquiry recommendations have been adamant. ABC-TV is under-going a profound fundamental change. One by one, regional Australian voices are being gagged and the foundation principles of public broadcasting are being ignored. Universal geographic accessibility is being denied, the contribution to a sense of national identity and community is being lost, guide lines that liberate rather than restrict program makers are being ignored and the competition for ratings rather than good programming are now the order of the day.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make this submission.

Darrell Meagher