

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

**Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications,
Legislation Committee, inquiry into Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015**

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015. The Australia Institute has a ongoing program of research into policy options around the ABC. Several of our research papers relate to the ABC's operations in rural and regional Australia and the ABC Charter.

Most recently, polling we commissioned in January 2016 shows strong public support in Tasmania for increased funding for the ABC in order to strengthen regional news services. 58% of Tasmanians support the proposal while 22% oppose and 21% are undecided.¹

This research builds on a larger study from 2015. In that report we found strong support for increased ABC funding related to regional news and other regional content. Support for such a funding proposal is unsurprisingly strong across rural and regional Australia, up to 64%, but also strong in capital cities, 58%. The research shows that support is also strong across political lines and in all electorates studied.²

An upcoming research paper will look in more detail at the ABC Charter. The ABC Act and the Charter are intended to give rationale and legitimacy to all the organisation's activities. The Charter does not prescribe specific programming or publishing measures, and is open to wide interpretation. Many people interpret the Charter differently and debate as to whether the ABC is meeting its Charter obligations is not uncommon.

Debate around how the public broadcaster functions and what it should be doing is a welcome influence towards accountability and relevance for all Australians. Campaigns relating to how the ABC interprets and fulfils its existing charter have real value and have surely contributed to the ABC's performance and immense popularity. Each year, Newspoll surveys the population and each year more than 80% of respondents say the ABC provides valuable services.³

Given this support for the ABC Board and management's interpretation of the existing charter, the need to change it is not clear. While increasing regional content is a worthwhile goal, and one with popular support, a change to the Charter is not the best way to achieve this goal.

¹ <http://www.tai.org.au/content/poll-tasmanians-support-additional-regional-abc-funding>

² http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P148%20ABC_Final_embargoed.pdf

³ "ABC Annual Report 2014-15," October 2015. http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2014-15_Annual_Report.pdf. Page 26

The Charter must remain open to interpretation by the ABC Board and management. It is not the place to make specific programming decisions. Doing so would reduce the ability of the ABC to respond to the ever evolving media environment and place its future relevance and popularity at risk.

Furthermore, it will not go unnoticed that this proposal to change the ABC Charter comes from the National Party. While support for increased regional ABC coverage goes beyond rural areas, it is these areas that would primarily benefit. These areas are also the Nationals' electoral base.

Changing the ABC Charter to primarily benefit the constituents of one party would set a dangerous precedent that could see other parties follow suit. A Labor government could mandate a degree of coverage of labour-related content. The Greens could require coverage of environmental issues. The Motoring Enthusiast Party could push for compulsory coverage of the Bathurst 1000 car race to be included in the Charter.

Increased regional content is, however, a worthwhile goal and one that can, and should, be pursued within the existing ABC Charter. One option would be to provide additional funding to the ABC that is tied to rural and regional content, or grants aimed at restoring and expanding ABC facilities in regional Australia.

The Australia Institute's research on these topics is ongoing. We would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission in the future either at a public hearing or in writing.

Yours sincerely,

Rod Campbell
Research Director
The Australia Institute
Canberra, ACT

The **Australia** Institute

Research that matters.

Heartland:

Why the bush needs its ABC

September 2015

Molly Johnson

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

About TAI

The Australia Institute is an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra. It is funded by donations from philanthropic trusts and individuals and commissioned research. Since its launch in 1994, the Institute has carried out highly influential research on a broad range of economic, social and environmental issues.

Our philosophy

As we begin the 21st century, new dilemmas confront our society and our planet. Unprecedented levels of consumption co-exist with extreme poverty. Through new technology we are more connected than we have ever been, yet civic engagement is declining. Environmental neglect continues despite heightened ecological awareness. A better balance is urgently needed.

The Australia Institute's directors, staff and supporters represent a broad range of views and priorities. What unites us is a belief that through a combination of research and creativity we can promote new solutions and ways of thinking.

Our purpose—'Research that matters'

The Institute aims to foster informed debate about our culture, our economy and our environment and bring greater accountability to the democratic process. Our goal is to gather, interpret and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them.

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Summary

Regional media is viewed as an essential democratic institution by regional Australians, with 95 per cent accessing some type of local content each week. Regional media is an important source of news, weather, and emergency information. It also contributes to a sense of community and identity within a region.

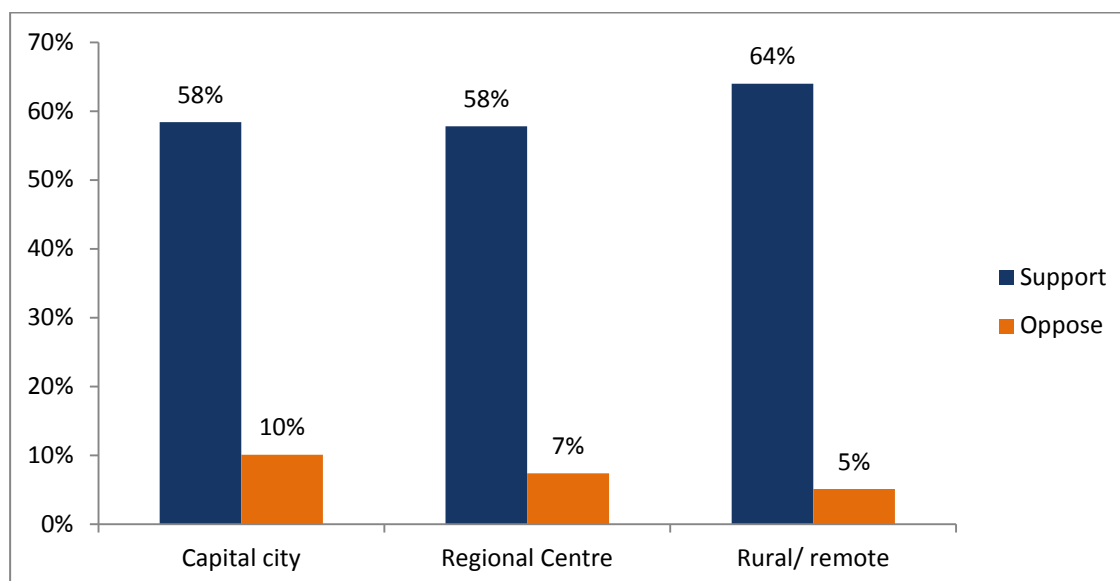
However, regional media is in decline in Australia. A third of regional areas do not meet the minimum requirements of media diversity under the Broadcasting Services Act. Furthermore, many groups, such as The Friends of the ABC and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, argue that the ABC is failing to fulfil its governing Charter to provide adequate services to regional Australia.

Commercial media has no intention of expanding operations in regional Australia. The commercial TV industry group, Free TV Australia, declared that the ABC is best suited to provide additional regional news broadcasts.

Expanding the ABC's regional services will require additional funding. The ABC budget, however, has been cut by the current government. If a change of approach at the political level is to be achieved, understanding public support for such an expansion is important.

There is very strong overall support for increasing funding of the ABC to improve regional services, even among city-dwelling Australians:

Support for additional ABC funding – Regional news services



Source: National poll of 1413 people. Question: For each of the following do you support or oppose additional funding of the ABC – regional news services.

Further electorate polling by The Australia Institute shows that support for expanding ABC funding for regional services is almost universal among Labor and Greens voters, with support amongst Coalition voters varying across electorates. Strong support for the ABC is found within some Coalition electorates, such as in Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce's electorate in New England, NSW:

New England: Support for expanded ABC regional news services, by party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Nationals	52%	27%	21%	50%
Labor	73%	24%	4%	24%
Greens	90%	7%	3%	8%
Total	64%	24%	13%	100%

Similarly, Education Minister Christopher Pyne's electorate strongly supported expansion:

Sturt: Support for expanded ABC regional news services, by party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	57%	26%	17%	44%
Labor	79%	20%	1%	35%
Greens	56%	41%	3%	8%
Total	65%	27%	9%	100%

But in contrast, Communications Minister Malcom Turnbull represents an electorate with Coalition voters largely opposed to this policy:

Wentworth: Support for expanded ABC regional news services, by party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	26%	34%	40%	49%
Labor	78%	11%	11%	25%
Greens	83%	15%	2%	14%
Total	51%	26%	23%	100%

Ironically, the Minister for the ABC appears to be the Member with the most opposition amongst Liberal voters to extra funds for regional services. However overall, even in this inner city electorate, total support for extra resources for the bush remains strong.

Introduction

Everyone, the government included, is concerned that regional communities around Australia have access to news, presented and written by journalists who understand their area, their people and their issues

Malcolm Turnbull, Minister for Communications¹

The Minister for Communication's concern about the decline of regional media is shared by many Australians, and with good reason. Local media provides news, weather, sport, information on community events and emergency situations, as well as contributing to a sense of community and identity within a region. Local media is viewed by regional Australians as an essential democratic institution that provides accountability around local issues.² The former News Corp boss John Hartigan has noted that cuts to regional media threaten "the capacity for regional Australians to participate in the national debate".³ Nick Xenophon has stated that without local news, rural communities will become more marginalised and be at a disadvantage to those who live in cities. He believes "people living in these areas have a right to be provided with meaningful and relevant information in a timely manner".⁴

A survey by the Australian Communications and Media Authority found that access to local content was important to 9 in 10 regional Australians and 95 per cent of regional people access some type of local content in their area. This included eight in ten people who accessed local television or local newspaper content at least once a week and six in ten who listened to local radio weekly.⁵

Despite its importance, all is not well in Australia's regional media. The rise of digital media has put pressure on all traditional media agencies and forced them to seek savings. Commonly, these savings come in the form of centralising production in capital cities and cutting jobs and services in regional areas. In recent years these cuts have become more common. For example, in February 2013 WIN television withdrew its license from the Riverland and Mount Gambier regions in South Australia citing cost pressures and low audience sizes and left the regions without a dedicated local news service.⁶

A report by Media Watch on regional media noted that all of the main regional broadcasters, had shut down services in recent years:

Since 2010 WIN has also canned its local news bulletin in Mt Gambier and closed bureaus in Albany, Geraldton and Broome. Meanwhile, Prime has shut down its broadcast studios in Tamworth, Orange and Wagga Wagga. And Southern Cross has sacked more than a dozen staff in Canberra and is reviewing services in Tasmania and regional South Australia.⁷

Cuts in regional media have not been confined to television broadcasting. Earlier this year Fairfax Media announced a proposal to cut 80 newspaper staff, including 62 journalists, from their regional newspapers including The Border Mail in Albury-Wodonga, The Courier in

¹ The Newspaper Works, "Need for less regulation, not more: Turnbull".

² Tim Dwyer et al., "Content, Consolidation and Clout: How will regional Australia be affected by media ownership changes?" (Communications Law Centre, 2006).

³ mUmBRELLA, "Regional media risks 'losing voice' amid cuts and Govt apathy, warns Prime Media Chairman".

⁴ Nick Xenophon, "Submission: Local Content investigation".

⁵ Australian Communications and Media Authority, "Regional commercial television local content investigation" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

⁶ Australian Communications and Media Authority (2013).

⁷ Media Watch, "Save our voices stalemate".

Ballarat, The Bendigo Advertiser and The Standard in Warrnambool. These cuts will place pressure on journalists and see them doing multiple tasks such as writing, sub-editing and taking photographs for their stories.⁸

The four independent regional broadcasters, Prime, WIN, Southern Cross and Impajara have begun a push to change the media concentration rules.⁹ The networks have started a campaign called 'Save our Voices' which seeks to abolish, among other things the 75 per cent reach rule which prevents a company from controlling a license area that reaches more than 75 per cent of the population. The networks argue that these rules are no longer appropriate since regional media markets are in competition with online news channels which are not restricted by such rules.¹⁰

The 75 per cent rule was investigated by a Government Committee in 2013. The Committee found that if the rule was removed, regional networks would most likely merge with metropolitan networks which would increase efficiency for the broadcasters.¹¹ However, there is concern that if these rules are abolished it would further decrease regional media diversity and local news coverage.¹² The Committee therefore recommended that the rule should only be abolished if legislative that protects local content is put in place.¹³

The ABC forms a big part of regional media in Australia. It has 400 broadcasters and reporters in regional and rural Australia and provides 3,400 hours of regional news bulletins every year. 47 of the ABC's 55 local radio stations are located outside of capital cities.¹⁴ Overall, no other media organisation has the same focus on regional Australia.¹⁵ The ABC is also the most trusted media organisation. Polling done in April 2013 by The Australia Institute found that 41 per cent of people trust the ABC and only 15 per cent do not trust it. In contrast, only 1 in 10 Australians trust commercial media and the majority (53 per cent) do not trust it.¹⁶

However, ABC regional media is also under great pressure. Regional programming such as the state-based 7.30 programs and radio show *The Bush Telegraph* were axed in the latest round of ABC cuts.¹⁷ Other cuts included the closure of five regional radio posts in Wagin WA, Morwell Vic, Gladstone Qld, Port Augusta SA and Nowra NSW.¹⁸

ABC Management argued that these radio posts were expensive to maintain and the content implication of their closure was minimal.¹⁹ However, others argued that these closures would have an impact on local news.²⁰ For example, in Morwell a fire broke out in the Hazelwood mine and burned for 45 days and angered local residents who felt uninformed about the

⁸ Mark Dunn, "Fairfax Media plans to axe staff from regional newspapers and websites", in *Herald Sun*.

⁹ Darren Davidson, "Regional TV networks to slash news budgets", in *The Australian*.

¹⁰ Save our Voices, "Frequently asked Questions".

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia; Joint Select Committee on Broadcasting legislation, "Three broadcasting reform proposals" (2013).

¹² Department of Communications, "Media control and ownership: Policy Background Paper No. 3" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia; Joint Select Committee on Broadcasting legislation, "Three broadcasting reform proposals" (2013).

¹⁴ Parliament of Australia, "Environment and Communications Legislation Committee - 01/12/2014 - Estimates - Communications Portfolio - Australian Broadcasting Corporation".

¹⁵ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "ABC news services in rural and regional Australia" (Submission to Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, 2013).

¹⁶ The Australia Institute poll of 1406 Australians, representing the national population. Conducted in April 2013.

¹⁷ Anna Patty, "Reality bites for ABC staff as 400 face the axe", in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

¹⁸ Andrew Greene, "ABC cuts: Malcolm Turnbull suggests ABC had 'political bargain' with Labor; Tony Abbott admits regret pledging to spare broadcaster from cuts", in *ABC*.

¹⁹ ABC, "Our ABC, Our Future: A message from Mark Scott", in *ABC*.

²⁰ Patrick Williams, "ABC cuts to have 'huge impact' on Queensland, Labor leader says", in *ABC*.

potential health risks of living near the mine fire.²¹ There are concerns that the closing of the Morwell radio post will leave local residents without access to this vital local news if a similar event happens in the future.²²

More than half of all ABC staff (51.3 per cent) are now located in NSW, with the bulk in Sydney. This is a four per cent increase over ten years, compared with South Australia which has seen the largest decline of staff from 8.3 per cent of ABC staff to 6.9 per cent.²³ A survey of ABC regional journalists and staff found that one of the key factors impacting the coverage of local news was the drain of resources away from regional areas to the cities.²⁴

Regional media failing to meet regulations

Not only has regional media declined, but in many areas it no longer meets the standards set by the relevant regulations. The ABC also comes close to failing to fulfil its charter in regard to regional media.

Media diversity in regional areas is often below what is required by the Broadcasting Services Act. Under this act, a regional area requires four media 'voices'. A voice includes commercial TV and radio and associated newspapers.²⁵ Based on June 2014 figures, nearly a third of regional areas do not meet the minimum requirements of media diversity. 44 per cent of regional areas are at the minimum level of four voices. The regions with the lowest level of media diversity are listed below:

- One voice: Remote region of north east Queensland
- Two voices: Port Lincoln, the Spencer Gulf and the Riverlands in South Australia and Griffith in New South Wales.²⁶

The ABC is governed by a Charter that states that it must broadcast "programs that contribute to a sense of national identity".²⁷ The ABC has stated that in order to fulfil this Charter obligation they must have a focus on regional areas.²⁸ The ABC Management has confirmed this interpretation, saying "service to regional communities [is] integral to meeting its charter obligations".²⁹

However, there is concern that the ABC is failing to meet this requirement of its Charter. In November 2012 the Senate referred the ABC's commitment to regional diversity to a Senate Committee Inquiry. The Committee heard concerns from many groups that the closure of production units outside major capital cities and the centralisation of the ABC in Sydney and Melbourne meant that the ABC was not meeting its Charter. Groups that made submissions

²¹ Kathy Lord, "Hazelwood mine fire: Looking back at the blaze that threatened Morwell", in ABC.

²² Deborah Gouch and Nick Toscano, "ABC cuts in Victoria: 'News 24 is the elephant in the room'", *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

²³ Nick Xenophon, "It's our ABC, not Sydney's".

²⁴ Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, "Submission to Senate Inquiry into the ABC on the matter of regional diversity" (2013).

²⁵ Department of Communications, "Media control and ownership: Policy Background Paper No. 3" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

²⁶ Department of Communications (2014).

²⁷ Australian Government, "Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983".

²⁸ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "ABC news services in rural and regional Australia" (Submission to Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, 2013).

²⁹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2013).

to the inquiry included the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, Friends of the ABC and the Tasmanian Minister for Community Development³⁰.

The Committee did raise concerns about the ABC's commitment to regional diversity, however it did not find that the ABC was in breach of its Charter. While the Committee did not want to impinge on the ABC's independence or limit the way in which it meets its Charter obligations it did have a number of recommendations to ensure the ABC remained committed to regional diversity. For instance, the Committee recommended that the ABC Charter should be amended to ensure the ABC is "producing content across all platforms that reflects regional diversity"³¹. The Committee also recommended that the ABC establish a fund for production outside of Sydney and Melbourne and that the ABC should regularly publish its financial commitment outside of Sydney and Melbourne³². The aim of these recommendations is to ensure the ABC's commitment to regional diversity does not decline.

There is genuine concern amongst the community that ABC funding cuts will result in less regional diversity and a failure of the ABC to fulfil its Charter obligations.

Reversing regional media decline

Addressing issues at the ABC is central to any approach to tackling the decline of regional media. The commercial TV industry group Free TV Australia says that the ABC is best suited to provide additional regional news broadcasts. Free TV believes that if regional news is decided to be in the public interest the government should provide it instead of imposing additional regulations on commercial broadcasters, who are currently required to produce minimum levels of local content³³. Free TV represents commercial broadcasters that are required to produce minimum levels of local content which Similar sentiments are likely to be held by other parts of the media, for whom servicing regional areas is unlikely to be profitable.

Addressing the decline of ABC regional media is likely to require increased funding. Funding restrictions to the ABC are exacerbating the problems of regional reporters. There was a 23 per cent decrease in real funding of the ABC between 1986 and 2013.³⁴ Treasurer Joe Hockey announced a funding cut of \$254 million over five years in the 2014-15 Budget, despite an election promise to not cut ABC funding.³⁵ These funding cuts hit regional areas the hardest as there are relatively small numbers of staff covering wide spread communities with diverse needs.

ABC funding is a strongly political issue. The Australia Institute has conducted polling to explore attitudes towards increasing funding for ABC regional services across a range of voters and electorates.

Targeted funding is politically popular

The results of two Australia Institute surveys show strong support for additional funding for ABC regional services.

³⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, "Environment and Communications References Committee: The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity" (2013).

³¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2013).

³² Commonwealth of Australia (2013).

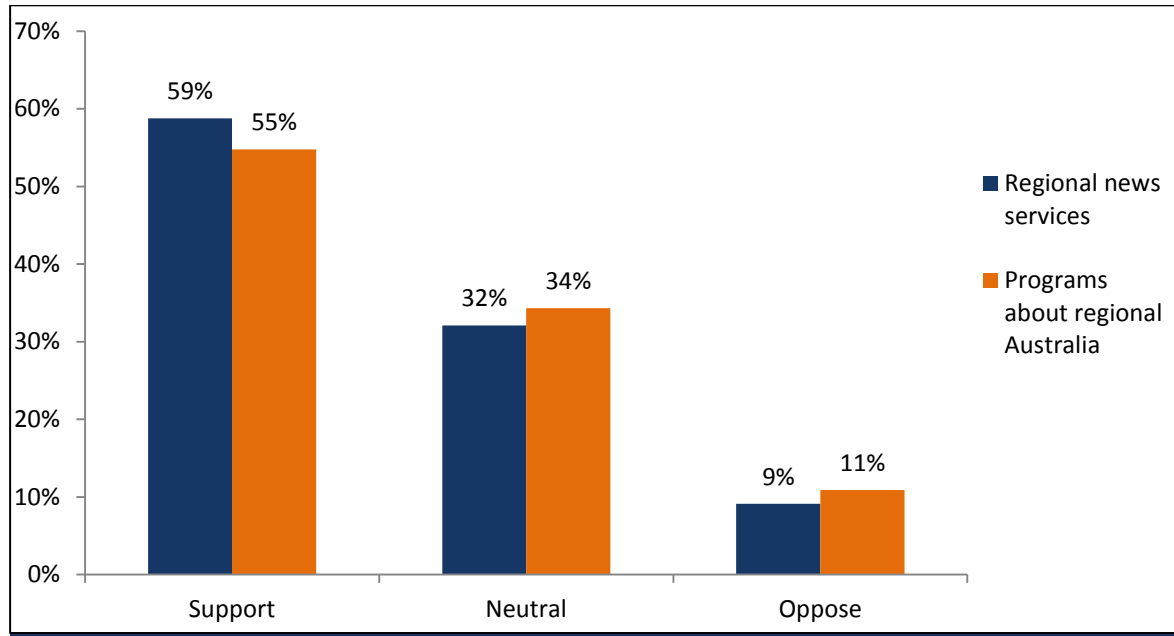
³³ Free TV Australia, "Submission by Free TV Australia: Regional television local content investigation" (2013).

³⁴ Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, "Submission to Senate Inquiry into the ABC on the matter of regional diversity" (2013).

³⁵ Australian Government, "Budget Paper No 2".

The first survey in March 2015 asked respondents to rate their position on additional funding for the ABC to produce regional news services and programs about regional Australia.³⁶ A strong majority of respondents support additional funding of both regional news services (59 per cent) and programs about regional Australia (55 per cent). Only a small number oppose additional funding for these services; nine per cent for regional news services and 11 per cent for regional content, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Support for additional ABC regional funding

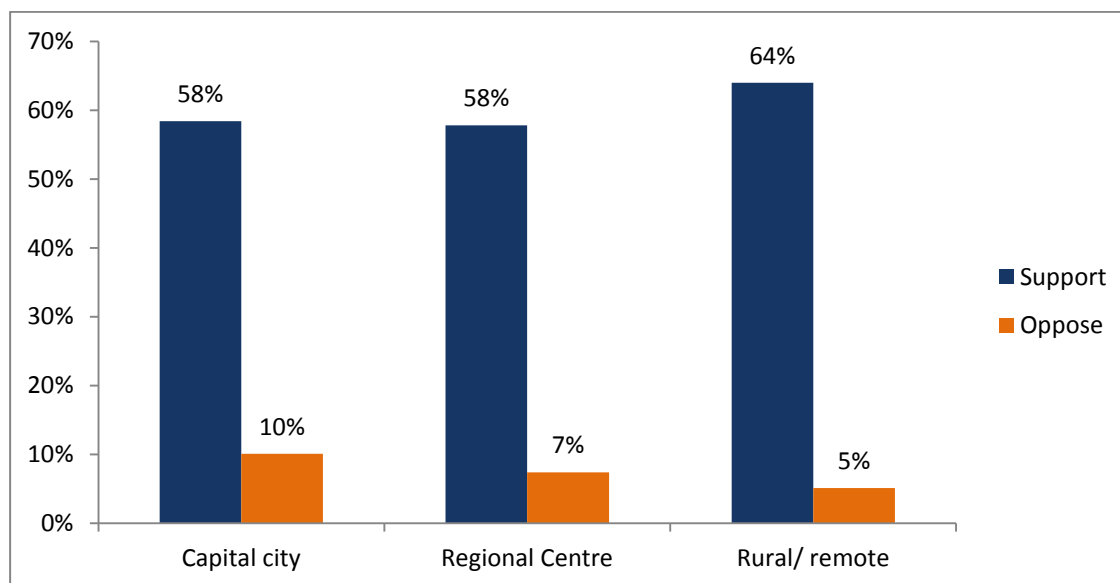


Source: Australia Institute survey (n=1,413)

The results shown in Figure 1 are reflected across rural, regional and capital city areas. People in regional centres have similar levels of support to those in capital cities while those who live in rural and remote areas are slightly more supportive of additional funding for ABC regional broadcasting, as shown in Figures 2 and 3 below:

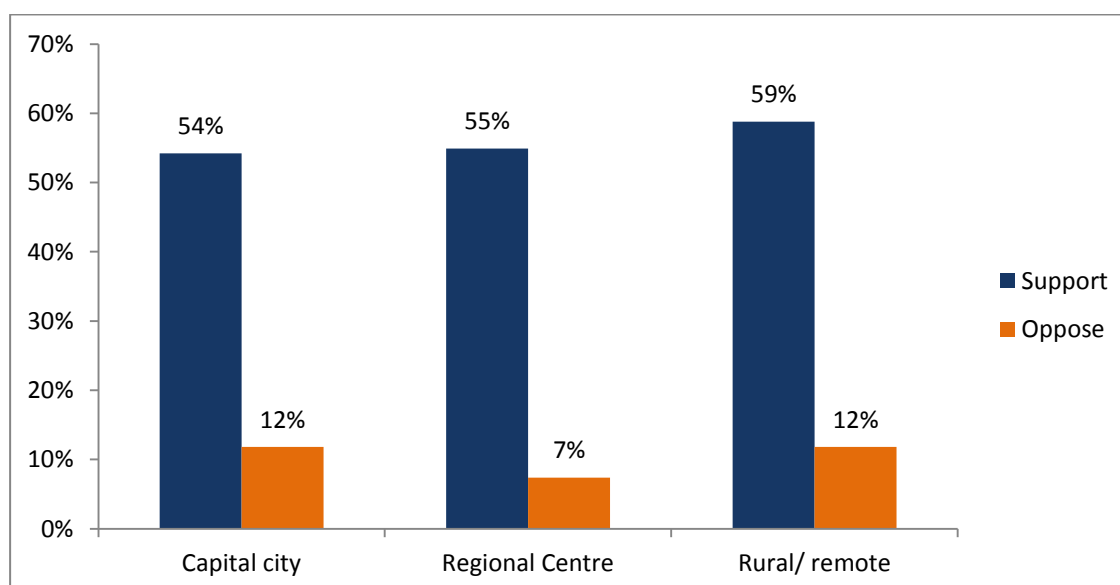
³⁶ Online survey of 1413 people. Respondents were sourced from a reputable independent online survey provider, Research Now, who earn reward points to participate. Respondents were representative of the adult Australian population by age and gender and state. Respondents were asked whether they support or oppose additional funding for the ABC for programs about regional Australia and regional news services.

Figure 2: Support for additional funding – Regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=1,413)

Figure 3: Support for additional funding – Programs about regional Australia



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=1,413)

Figures 2 and 3 show that even among respondents who live in capital cities a majority of respondents favour increased ABC funding for regional programming, with levels of support only slightly below that of respondents in rural/remote areas. 64 per cent of those in rural and remote areas support additional funding for regional news services compared to 58 per cent of those who live in capital cities. Similarly, 59 per cent of those in rural areas support funding for programs about regional Australia compared to 54 per cent of those in capital cities.

The Australia Institute conducted a further survey of key electorates in April 2015.³⁷ Respondents were asked whether they would *support or oppose additional funding for the ABC to invest in more regional news services*. They were also asked which political party would receive their first preference vote if an election was held today in order to conduct an analysis by political party preference. The electorates that were surveyed were all government held seats and included three regional and three metropolitan electorates. The electorates were:

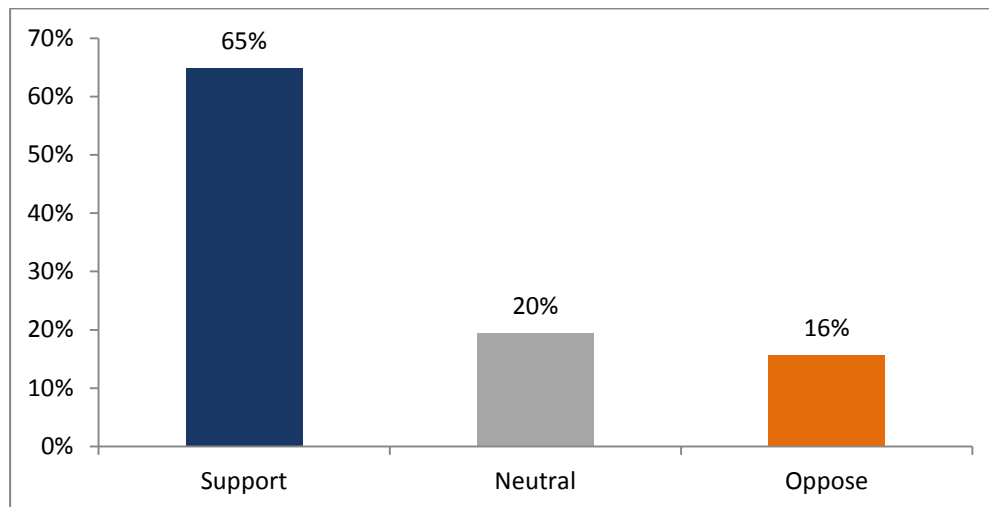
- Eden-Monaro
- New England
- Wide-Bay
- Sturt
- North Sydney
- Wentworth

Eden-Monaro

Eden-Monaro is a marginal regional seat located in south east NSW. It is known as a 'bellwether seat' – a seat that signals the direction the rest of the Australian electorate is likely to go. Eden-Monaro has been held by the government of the day since 1972 and is currently represented by Liberal MP Peter Hendy.

Around two-thirds (65 per cent) of all respondents in Eden-Monaro support additional funding for ABC regional news services. Only 16 per cent of respondents were opposed to further funding, as shown in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Eden – Monaro: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=724)

Table 1 illustrates the support and opposition for additional funding broken down by current political party preference. As can be seen in Table 1 Labor and Greens voters have high levels of support that far outweigh any opposition to additional funding. Nearly one third of respondents in Eden-Monaro are Labor voters who support additional funding.

Eden-Monaro Liberal voters also generally support additional ABC regional funding, although less so than Labor and Green voters. Around forty per cent of Liberal voters support

³⁷ The Australia Institute conducted a telephone survey through the survey provider Reachtel across six electorates during the evening of 27th April 2015. The sample size for each electorate is listed underneath each of the relevant Figures.

additional funding of the ABC, making up nearly one fifth (17 per cent) of all voters in Eden-Monaro.

Table 1: Eden-Monaro: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	43%	29%	29%	39%
Labor	81%	14%	5%	39%
Greens	90%	3%	8%	11%

Source: Australia Institute survey (n=724)

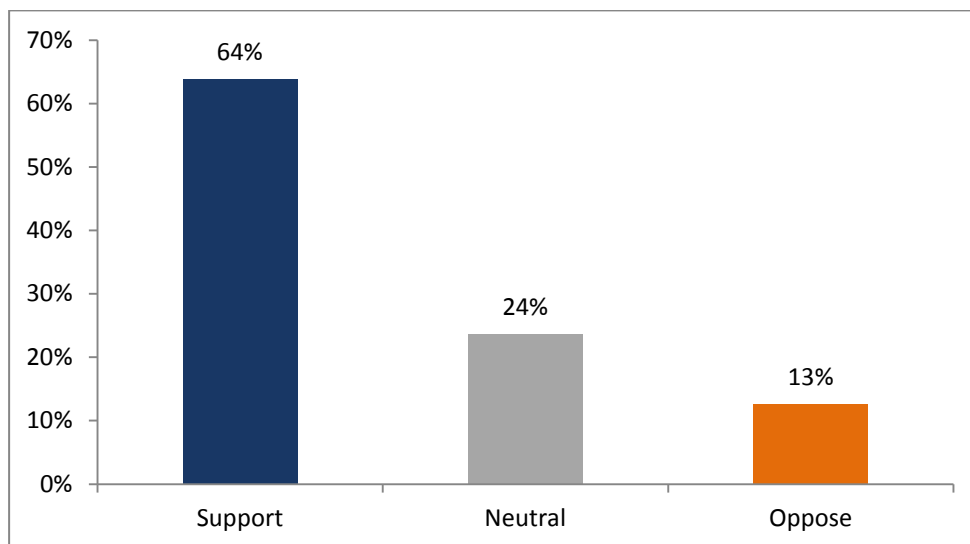
Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

New England

New England is a regional NSW seat held by Nationals MP and Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce. Joyce has been outspoken about support for ABC regional news. Before the 2014 ABC cuts he sought assurances from Prime Minister Tony Abbott that regional news would not be cut and stated the importance of regional services saying “radio in regional areas serves a crucial purpose”.³⁸

There is high levels of support for additional ABC funding in New England with nearly two thirds (64 per cent) supporting additional funding and only 13 per cent opposed, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: New England: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=713)

Support for additional ABC regional news funding is strong in New England respondents across all political preferences. Support amongst National voters is high with more than half supporting additional funding and only one fifth opposing it. More than one in four people in New England are National voters who support additional funding.

³⁸ Nick Butterly, “ABC country cuts worry Joyce”, in *Yahoo News*.

Support for additional funding of regional news is stronger still amongst Greens and Labor voters in New England with 9 in 10 Greens voters and 7 in 10 Labor voters supportive, as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: New England: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Nationals	52%	27%	21%	50%
Labor	73%	24%	4%	24%
Greens	90%	7%	3%	8%

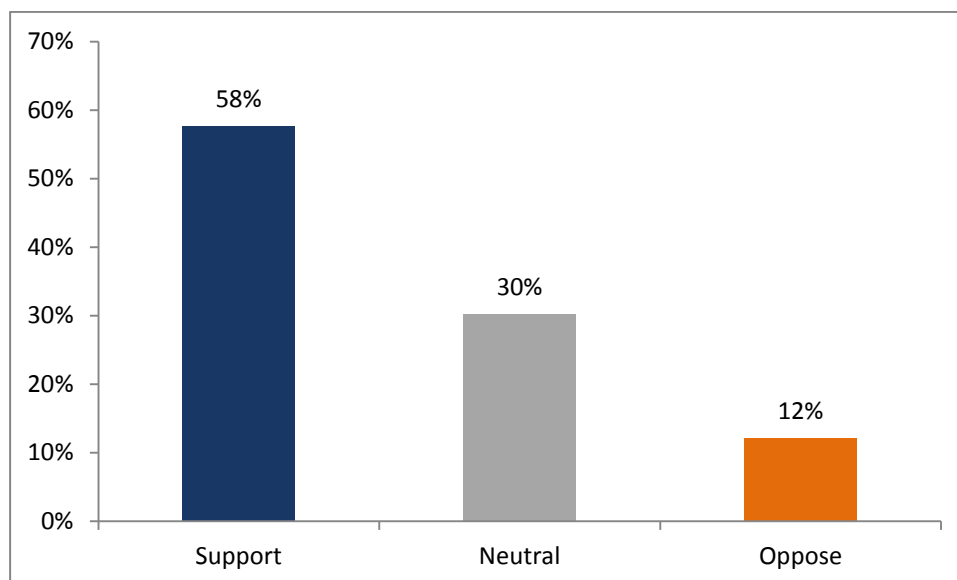
Source: Australia Institute survey (n=713)

Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

Wide Bay

Wide Bay is a regional seat in south east Queensland held by Liberal National Party MP and Deputy Prime Minister, Warren Truss. While Truss has made few public comments about ABC regional news or funding, support for additional regional news funding in Wide Bay is strong. Nearly 6 in 10 people (58 per cent) in Wide Bay are supportive of additional funding and only around 1 in 10 are opposed (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Wide Bay: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=733)

Support for additional funding is strong amongst all political parties with support clearly outweighing opposition. While support within a group of voters is highest amongst Labor and Greens voters, the high number of National voters within Wide Bay means that more than one in five people in Wide Bay are National voters who support additional regional news funding (Table 3).

Table 3: Wide Bay: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Nationals	48%	35%	18%	48%
Labor	68%	24%	7%	25%
Greens	82%	15%	3%	9%

Source: Australia Institute survey (n=733)

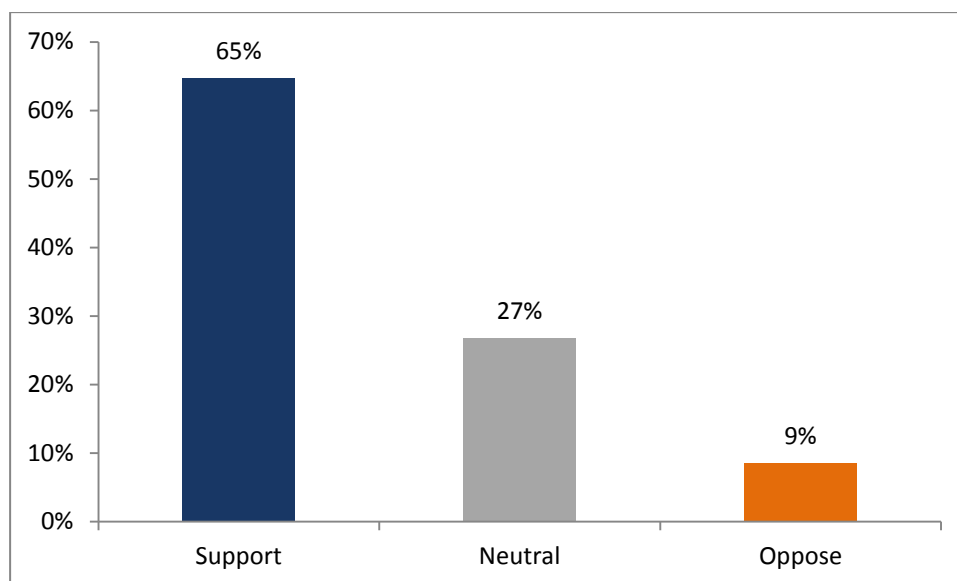
Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

Sturt

Sturt is an electorate in Adelaide held by Education Minister Christopher Pyne. Pyne has been outspoken about cuts to the ABC in South Australia. In November 2014 when the ABC was announcing the closure of the Adelaide production studio he set up an online petition on change.org to oppose the closure.³⁹

Sturt has the highest level of support for additional ABC regional news funding of all electorates surveyed. Around two thirds (65 per cent) of people in Sturt support additional funding and only nine per cent oppose it, as shown in Figure 7:

Figure 7: Sturt: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=749)

Sturt also has the highest level of support amongst Liberal voters compared to all the other electorates (Table 4). Nearly six in ten (57 per cent) Liberal voters support additional funding of ABC regional news services, far outweighing Liberal voters who are opposed. One in four voters in Sturt are Liberal voters who support additional funding while only seven per cent of people in Sturt are Liberal voters who oppose funding.

³⁹ Sara Garcia, "Federal MP Christopher Pyne launches online petition to save ABC jobs in Adelaide", in *ABC News*.

Support for additional funding is strong amongst Labor voters with 8 in 10 supportive. Labor voters who support additional funding make up a significant proportion of the electorate; nearly three in ten people in Sturt are Labor voters who support additional funding. This indicates that regardless of someone's political persuasion, support for additional funding is strong in the electorate of Sturt.

Table 4: Sturt: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	57%	26%	17%	44%
Labor	79%	20%	1%	35%
Greens	56%	41%	3%	8%

Source: Australia Institute survey (n=749)

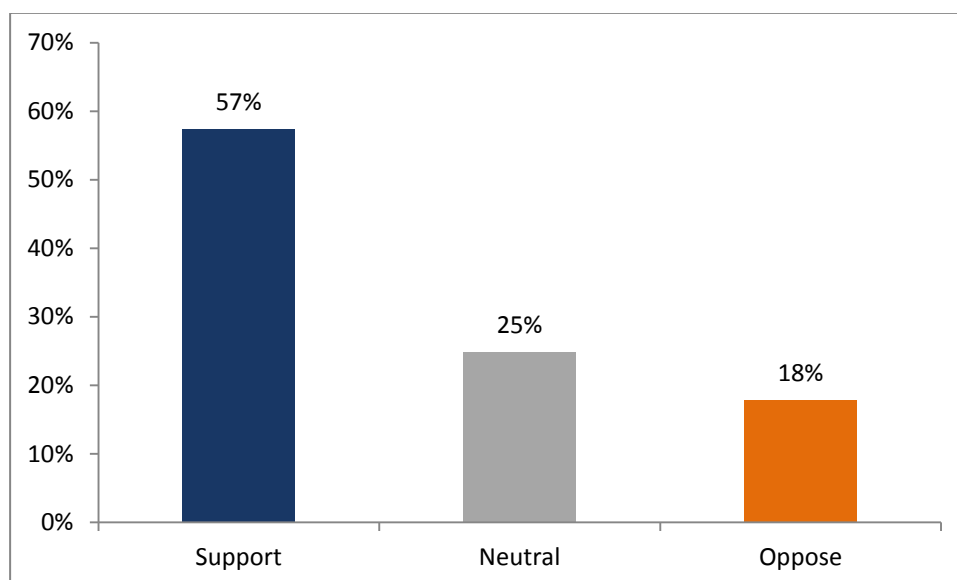
Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

North Sydney

North Sydney is a metropolitan electorate held by Treasurer Joe Hockey. Hockey, in his role as Treasurer oversaw the \$254 million cut to the ABC in last year's budget. Cuts to regional ABC services such as the closure of five regional radio posts occurred in response to this budget decision.

Support for additional regional funding of the ABC is strong in North Sydney with more than half (57 per cent) of those in the electorate in support and less than one in five opposed (Figure 8).

Figure 8: North Sydney: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=728)

Support for additional funding is strong across all political parties. As shown in Table 5 support amongst Labor and Greens voters far outweighs opposition. Amongst Liberal voters support is also higher than opposition, though to a smaller extent. One in five people in North

Sydney are Liberal voters who support additional funding while 15 per cent are Liberal voters who oppose additional funding.

Table 5: North Sydney: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	42%	26%	32%	46%
Labor	71%	20%	9%	26%
Greens	79%	21%	0%	15%

Source: Australia Institute survey (n=728)

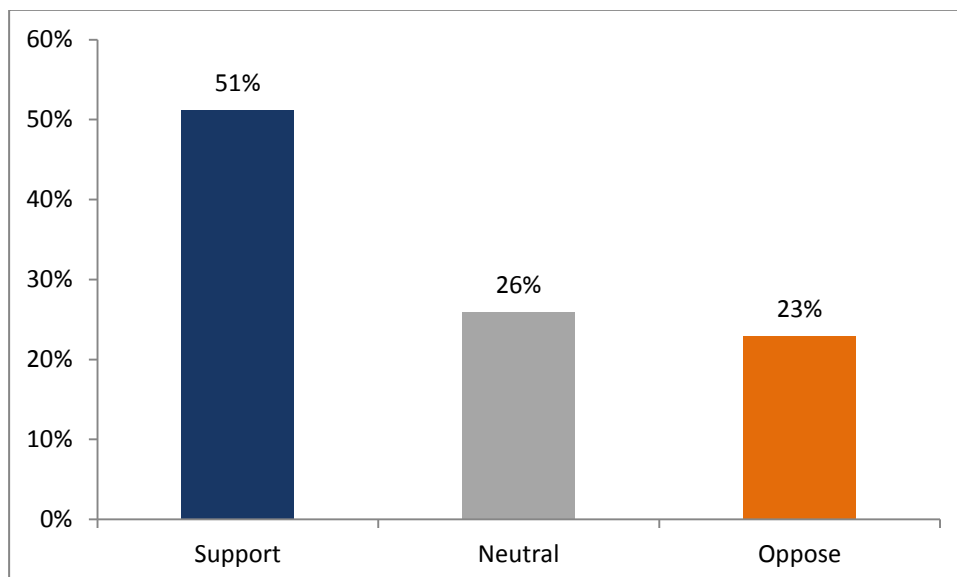
Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

Wentworth

Wentworth is a Sydney electorate, held by Communication Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Turnbull, in his role as Communications Minister, is responsible for the ABC. After last year's budget he announced the \$254 million cut to ABC funding. He is also a strong supporter of the ABC and spoke at the launch of the Parliamentary Friends of the ABC. Though he is not a member of the parliamentary group his spokesmen described him as a 'lower case friend of the ABC'⁴⁰.

51 per cent of people in Wentworth support funding for ABC regional news while nearly one in four (23 per cent) oppose it, as shown in Figure 9. This represents the lowest level of support and highest level of opposition for additional ABC regional news funding of the six electorates surveyed.

Figure 9: Wentworth: Additional funding for ABC regional news services



Source: Australia Institute survey (n=735)

⁴⁰ Matthew Knott, "Malcolm Turnbull launches Parliamentary Friends group to defend ABC", in *SMH*.

While support far outweighs opposition amongst Labor and Greens voters, this is not the case for Liberal voters. A higher number of Liberal voters in Wentworth are opposed to additional funding than those who are supportive, as shown in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Wentworth: Support for additional funding of ABC regional news services, by political party preference

	Support	Neutral	Oppose	% of voters in electorate
Liberal	26%	34%	40%	49%
Labor	78%	11%	11%	25%
Greens	83%	15%	2%	14%

Source: Australia Institute survey (n=735)

Note: People who selected undecided or a minor party are not represented in the table

In the Communications Minister's electorate, 20 per cent of respondents would vote Liberal and oppose further funding for ABC regional news. Only 26 per cent of Liberal voters support further funding, with 40 per cent opposed and one third of people neutral.

Conclusion

Regional media is highly valued by people living in regional Australia, but declining staffing levels and funding are placing it at risk. Regulations around media diversity and the ABC's charter relating to regional coverage are, demonstrably or arguably, not being met.

To address these failings, expanding the funding of ABC regional services is likely to be the most effective policy. The Senate Committee into ABC regional diversity also recommended the ABC should regularly publish its financial commitment outside of Sydney and Melbourne. Political support for better funding of regional services is strong.

The analysis of electorates discussed above reveals a number of key points:

- Overall there is strong support for the additional funding of ABC regional services.
- Support is almost universal among Labor and Greens voters.
- Support for additional funding varies among coalition voters.

Coalition politicians seem closely attuned to the attitudes of their voting base. For instance, Barnaby Joyce and Christopher Pyne, who have both publicly campaigned for ABC services, have strong support for the national broadcaster within their electorates generally and within coalition voters.

In contrast, Joe Hockey and Malcolm Turnbull, who were in charge of announcing the ABC budget cuts, have lower levels of support among Coalition voters in their electorates. Ironically the Communications Minister, the minister for the ABC relies on the votes of the least supportive voters in our survey. Malcolm Turnbull's electorate of Wentworth has the lowest level of support for additional ABC funding amongst Liberal voters with only 1 in 4 Liberal voters supporting additional funding. This is significantly lower than the level of support amongst LNP voters in other electorates where at least 40 per cent of LNP voters supported regional news services. The Minister for the ABC appears to be the Member with the most opposition to the ABC in his electorate. However, even here total support is strong.

In a swinging, regional seat like Eden-Monaro, support for additional regional ABC funding is important. With considerable support among coalition voters and near-complete support

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among Labor voters, supporting further regional funding is likely to be a popular position among swinging voters.

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