

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN THE ABC

By Sean Farrelly

Dr Denis Muller wrote in his submission to the Inquiry that:

“Of course accountability on the part of the ABC to government and the wider society is both necessary and desirable and some of the political actions that affect the ABC are directed at that purpose.”

Certainly “political actions” are subjective, therefore I would like to focus on the second part of Dr Muller’s statement, ie “the wider society”.

Duties of the Board

Section 8 of the ABC Act sets out the Board’s duties thus:

“ (1) It is the duty of the Board:

- (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; and...

From this I extract the key words and phrases “efficiently”, “maximum benefit to the people of Australia”, “independence and integrity”, and “accurate and impartial”.

There are two problems here.

The first is a legal one.

The obligations of the Board are nowhere replicated in the Charter as set out in Section 6 of the Act. Thus an ABC staffer might read the Charter (in their spare time) and find that it was their duty to be “innovative”, “comprehensive” and “entertaining”. Should they be at a further loose end and go on to read Section 8, they might very well conclude that they themselves have no explicit obligation to behave “efficiently”, with “maximum benefit to the people of Australia”, with “independence and integrity”, or be “accurate and impartial”.

Is it any wonder that the ABC staff, their Board(s), politicians, the media and the people are so confused about what constitutes interference versus oversight?

A simple reading of Section 8 into Section 6 would fix it.

The second is about that journalistic saw, “transparency”.

I have an exciting solution to offer, nonetheless. All readers, viewers or listeners should be able to rate ABC pieces on three dimensions: relevance, accuracy and balance (in line with

the Charter). Such a system could be most easily applied in the first instance to things like Just In, The Conversation, Fact Check, etc.

The technology is available. After all the ABC Web Poll bangs out an interesting question to have a snort at nearly every day.

One might even ask whether the idea has been considered before and, if it was rejected, why?

Journalists get very excited about increased transparency until it applies to them. Or so it seems.