

Senate Inquiry: The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

Paul Blake CPSU Regional Director Tasmania 18th January 2013

While the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is putting in a national submission I thought it might be of assistance to the inquiry if I highlighted the recent Tasmanian experience, which in my mind clearly raises doubts on *the commitment by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia.*

I became heavily involved with our delegates and members in ABC Tasmania around two years ago. Throughout the last two years members have contacted me concerned around a number of changes which do look like centralisation and an uncertain future for Tasmania's ABC.

In that time we have seen decisions such as Hobart losing its Human Resources section (which is now provided by Melbourne), its Film Archives moving to Sydney, the Outside Broadcasting Van moving to Melbourne, the loss of coverage of local sport and the total dismantling of the Tasmanian Production Unit (at the time of writing we are still in an industrial dispute with ABC management).

CPSU members and the community have rightly raised the question: Does this concur with the ABC charter?

Summary of main points and recommendations in this submission

- An independent audit should be done to find out what has, and is, happening within ABC TV in regards to use of taxpayers funds and regional production.
- ABC regional studios, including Tasmania, have and are being systematically dismantled.
- The ABC is the only channel with the ability to represent a regional voice.
- Regional production relates to viewers/listeners from regional areas due to the nature of its content and the style of presentation.
- ABC funding may need to be allocated in a way that provides clear guidance to ABC management on how to meet the ABC charter and serve regional communities.
- The ABC has a wider role in regional communities than simply transmission.

Why is this Centralisation taking place?

Television Production

Discussions with ABC management about the closure of the Tasmanian Production Unit have resulted in management informing us that it is occurring for financial reasons. Yet when we ask for detail on the finances, or ask what would be cost effective in Tasmania there is never any answer provided.

There have been numerous attempts both within the current industrial dispute, in previous Senate Inquiries, and at Senate Estimates to obtain figures from the ABC on how it spends its funding.

Seldom are clear answers provided. For instance in our current dispute we have been refused any financial figures except to be told that the Tasmanian Production Unit costs \$1.5 million per year and is thus not financially viable (though we have nothing to compare this to or base this on).

What is clear is that once Kim Dalton became Director of Television there was a shift in focus for ABC TV. Principally this was to remove a lot of internal production and instead focus on buying programs and investing in co-productions.

While many people have espoused the view that Kim Dalton has been giving contracts for programs to a select group of independent producers there has never been an audit to see if this is the case. A common view is that Kim Dalton simply favored independent productions for personal or ideological reasons.

A reason that provides an incentive to outsourcing is that the ABC can get money from other sources when doing a co- production. The production company puts in a minimal amount of money, and then gets money from the ABC for commissioning, assistance from Screen Australia, assistance from state government screen associations and also a tax benefit.

So while the taxpayer is paying nearly the same amount of money it comes from a variety of sources which the ABC itself can not obtain when producing programs in house. The thing missing from this equation is that the ABC does not end up owning the program, nor its merchandise, but simply has the right to screen it once or twice.

I can understand that this would look good on the financial books in the short term, but given the number of repeats purchased to cover the multiple channels the ABC now has you have to ask: "Is this really the best approach?" It's probably not for the Australian Tax payer overall. An independent audit would provide some assistance in answering these questions.

Recent history of Tasmania Television Production

I do not intend to go through the full history of ABC Television in Tasmania but simply the last couple of years. Others are more qualified to tell the full history.

In 2010 the *Collectors* program was being produced by the Tasmanian ABC Production team when in December 2010 Kim Dalton visited the Tasmanian Premier and offered to 'sell' the program and its staff to the Tasmanian government. When this was declined he apparently again offered it to the next Premier early in the following year which was again declined.

It was mid 2011 when the *Collectors* program was 'rested'. There was some backlash from the wider Australian community and in particular the Tasmanian community on the future of the Tasmanian Production Unit. It was then that the Tasmanian Production Unit was given *Auction Room* to produce though I am told the final format was different then the initial proposal.

Auction Room lasted two series before Mark Scott announced on 20th November that it would no longer be commissioned and the Tasmanian Production Unit would close. We are told that the decision was made on the 16th November though it is apparent that management made the decision sometime before that.

The lack of commitment to regional production appears clear when we look in detail at Auction Room's history. *Auction Room* was given the 6pm Sunday time slot which is considered very difficult as it is against the most popular programs on commercial channels being the Sunday night news.

Further the program had little publicity whether through external advertising or 'promos' on ABC radio or television. As a regular ABC viewer myself I cannot recall ever seeing an ad for the program.

When announcing the closure Mr. Scott announced that he would offer \$1.5 million to the Tasmanian Government if they matched it for investment in co-productions. The Tasmanian Government is on public record as saying they cannot afford this contribution so how this money would be spent on Tasmanian production is still unclear.

Throughout consultation with ABC management on the Production Unit closure no details on any progress of this matter appears to be available.

Ratings for *Auction Room*

ABC management did say in 2011 that the future of the Tasmanian Production Unit was dependent on the audience response to *Auction Room*. Despite repeated questioning of ABC management we have never been given a figure on what ratings would be deemed to be a successful program.

I have recently received the ratings for Auction Room and they make interesting reading.

Series 1 of *Auction Room* rated 4.9% of audience and Series 2 rated 4.6% of audience for the time slot. This was more than the previous year's ratings for that period which was 3.5% in 2011 when another program was airing.

The last episode of *Auction Room* reached a viewing audience of 7.3%. This episode was shown at 6.30pm due to the Hockey Champions Trophy running overtime. I am told that the audience viewing the Hockey Champions Trophy at 6pm was considerably less than the number that normally viewed *Auction Room*, but I am yet to get the full figures.

I have asked ABC management for figures on the 6.30pm time slot but have been informed that they don't consider this relevant. However CPSU members inform me that the 7.3% of audience is considerably more than usually watch the 6.30pm time slot.

Series 1 had William McInnis as presenter, whereas Series 2 had Gordon Brown as a presenter. When you look at the figures broken down into the 5 capital cities it becomes apparent that the cities where Series 2 declined in popularity are Sydney and Melbourne, while the viewing audience either held up or improved in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

The two styles of presenter were markedly different, and it could be seen that having a presenter with a regional style better suited audiences outside Sydney and Melbourne. This demonstrates that different areas of Australia have different tastes and thus to truly represent and present content to regional people you need a voice from regional areas.

The ratings that the ABC provided to me are from the company OzTam and are based on Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth viewing figures. It is relevant to note that they did not provide ratings on Tasmania or other regional areas.

The focus of ABC Television seems to be on the ratings of the metropolitan audience. As such it can be gathered that they do not place importance on what programs are of regional appeal. At the same time there appears to be different viewing patterns in the audience outside Sydney and Melbourne.

What programs could be produced in a region such as Tasmania?

As well as having a regional voices there is also the role of ABC in producing stories about and based in regional areas. The Tasmanian Production Unit developed a number of ideas for ABC management on programs that could be produced locally with local content but management simply replied that it is *“unsustainable to successfully sustain ongoing Television production in Tasmania.”*

A list of ideas is below:

1. MONA FOMA- this event is coming up shortly and is a prime opportunity to be filmed and either be a short segment, a half hour program or to be inserted into another ABC Program.
2. Wooden Boat Festival: Could be a 1 or 3 part series or again some short stories, focusing on the building and maintenance of craft skills culminating in the Festival.
3. The Aurora: Already researched material about the ship that travels to Antarctica...lots to be explored along the lines of our connection to Antarctica, and the interest in CSIRO and the Australian Antarctic Division.
4. Fisherman of the Wild South Seas. This could even make a Prime Time spot, following the abalone and cray fishing characters braving the South West waters as they make their living. Encompasses shipwrecks/wild life stunning imagery of the Coast from the sea.
5. Wild adventures: already researched material on the extreme adventures people chase in Tasmania's environment – from big wave surfing to free form rock climbing on the Candlestick, BMX bandits in the bush...the ways people make use of the extreme environment for thrills.
6. Raising the Devil: a program about saving the Tas Devil from extinction
7. Short series on the native animals of Tasmania...5 minutes each evening of a different native animal profile.
8. Brightside Animal Sanctuary...already proposed but rejected for Prime Time. Focusing on the work of Brightside Animal Sanctuary in rescuing animals, rehoming animals and exposing cruel and illegal practise involving animals through undercover investigations.

9. Picnics in Paradise: Based on book by Chef Karen Gowlett Holmes, what to do with found produce, eg local oysters etc... explores not only the produce but the places they come from and is themed around picnics in varying locations in Tasmania.
10. Using his popularity we could make short or longer format content, such as Gordon Brown's hidden treasures ...a look behind some significant Australian antique items, or understanding antiques...could even do Gordon Brown House calls, like a mini Antiques Roadshow but in homes with Australian people and items
11. Everyday Heroes: Particularly springing from Bushfire Disasters, like a mini Australian Story on volunteers, helicopter water bomber pilots etc, but doesn't just need to be contained to those that work in emergency services.
12. Community stories...SMALL TOWNS profile of a different small community looking at threats they face and unique ideas to circumvent their closure.
13. Midwives: Given the success of the BBC Midwife drama, we could have a fly on the wall program that follows the extraordinary work of midwives, and the current planned shift back to enable women to have births at home not in the hospital.
14. ARCHIVAL: Many options for using archival film to base content ideas around, either for short form or educational purposes. A then and now, 7 up type program... follow up on stories from the 1960s and look at the changes in 50 years.

Other parts of ABC and comments on regional commitment

ABC Radio

The importance of ABC radio in regional areas is never more apparent than in times of emergency such as the bushfires in Tasmania recently. Local radio often provides the voice of the community and can be particularly important to those that are isolated in society.

There are constant pressures on the ABC radio budget and constant threats for local radio to take on mainland programs, particularly late at night. It is hoped that local ABC radio will be maintained in a similar format into the future as anecdotally there is a large audience.

ABC News

The creation of ABC News 24 obviously shows the commitment ABC has to providing news. The increased hours of broadcasting need to be covered, thus programs are needed.

Each state has its 7.30 report as well as the News and it was recently announced that a new earlier news program will be produced out of Perth. The Tasmanian situation does not look like changing

in the near future in regards to journalist and staff numbers, though the extent of coverage that can be done on local events may change due to the pending removal of the Outside Broadcasting Van from Tasmania.

Outside Broadcasting Van

In every state the ABC has an Outside Broadcasting Van (OB Van) that is used for big events.

The Tasmanian OB Van is about to be sent to Melbourne and decommissioned with no replacement. The van was used as the production studio for Collectors, state AFL football, Anzac Day, Elections and QI when visiting Tasmania.

The significance of this loss on Tasmania is large. The ability to produce certain styles of television programs will be lost and the incentive to cover local sport will be gone.

There is no doubt ABC management will say that AFL Tasmania pulled out of having ABC coverage. The fact is that the ABC insisted on a proposal to AFL Tasmania that they could not afford, nor agree to on behalf of the clubs that make up the competition. It would have been a drastic reduction in coverage of various teams and limited to the one ground. A more realistic view is that ABC management put up a proposal unlikely to be met and thus could then pull out of sport coverage.

While it is slightly out scope of this inquiry it should also be noted that the AFL filming was of assistance in Tasmanians getting considered by AFL football clubs as recruiters could watch footage of potential players. The loss of footage means extra effort is required by recruiters to consider Tasmanians.

There were alternatives to not screening any sport. ABC could have covered sports that had been done previously but it is my understanding that none were investigated. The ABC does still show national sport and local sport in some other states. If we are looking at commitment to regions this loss of any local sport demonstrates its lack of importance to the ABC direction.

It should be noted that a large number of casual employees worked on these sporting broadcasts. This was the workforce (eg cameramen, technicians) that work for private production companies. I am told that they counted on this casual work as a means of surviving between private production work, but with the loss of it they have had to leave the industry.

There are still question marks on how other events will be covered, though after much discussion the ABC has said it will send down the Melbourne OB Van for Anzac Day. It is however unclear whether it will be Tasmanian staff working on it.

Overall if Tasmania becomes one of the only states without an OB Van it means the flexibility to do big news events or complex internal production is limited into the future.

Film Archives

Each branch of the ABC has storage of film and tape archives. These are principally for news and other events that were filmed by the ABC. They are called upon for use in news and current affair stories as well as available to members of the public and to private production companies for a fee.

It has come to my attention that these are being moved to Sydney as part of a centralisation process. Brisbane and Adelaide have already had theirs sent to Sydney, with Hobart now being put in the process of doing so.

While there are arguments that the consolidation of these records is more secure and can be kept in the appropriate conditions we do have concerns that the access to them will be limited and the local knowledge to assist access will be removed.

There does not appear to be a financial reason for this centralisation, so again this raises questions as to the nature of the ABC as an organisation.

ABC as a provider of jobs

Making the ABC smaller in Tasmania has a broader effect than just on the ABC. As discussed above television production people have relied on casual work with the ABC to keep their heads above water between projects. The loss of sport and TV production means these people have no choice but to move interstate or to leave the industry to make ends meet.

Future television production workers are similarly affected. Those studying media courses at colleges or university have relied on the ABC for work experience, being able to tour a studio to see how it works and get a hands on feel for what the industry is like. The smaller the ABC gets in Tasmania, the more difficult this becomes for young Tasmanians aspiring to a career in media.

As well as losing current industry people, there is also likely to be a less Tasmanians in the film and television production industry in the future.

ABC as part of the community

On a final note it is worth considering the importance of the ABC to the Tasmanian community. Tasmanians feel a fondness and ownership of the ABC that I believe would not be as strong in the major cities.

An example of this is the high level of support that Tasmanian ABC staff have received from local politicians and the general public when consideration was being given to closing the Tasmanian Production Unit.

When the *Collectors* program visited regional areas of Australia large sections of the public would come to see the show in action.

A further example of the importance to regional communities is the ABC Giving Tree, which raises money and goods for charities throughout the pre Christmas period. It is now the biggest Christmas charity in Tasmania.

