

The Walkley Foundation Submission to the Inquiry into the allegations of political interference in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

November 2018

Introduction

1. The Walkley Foundation is at the heart of the Australian media. We recognise and promote excellence in our craft. We advocate for great journalism and work independently and collaboratively with all media.

Australians need journalism. It records, explains and shares our stories, holds the powerful to account, exposes corruption, protects the vulnerable, and points to solutions to our biggest problems. Journalism has enormous impact on Australian society, politics and culture.

2. Since 1956, the Foundation has celebrated and enabled excellence in journalism. We are a non-profit company limited by guarantee, on the Register of Cultural Organisations, and best known for the Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism, Australia's most prestigious journalism awards. Through the Walkley Awards, we benchmark journalistic excellence and through our Public Fund for Journalism we will continue to ensure the sustainability of the awards and invest in the type of ground-breaking public interest journalism that is so important to our communities
3. Furthermore, the Walkleys enjoy support from Australian journalists, all media organisations, and local, state, territory and federal governments of all stripes. Our directors have included many of Australia's most respected journalists including Angelos Frangopoulos AM, Quentin Dempster, AM, Laurie Oakes, and Fran Kelly. About to join our Board are Lenore Taylor and Kerry O'Brien. Our current directors are listed [here](#). We garner support broadly from the community, with many of Australia's best known organisations lending their support along with educational institutions and governments. Putting commercial rivalries aside we all believe that ethical, professional, public interest journalism is the basis of an informed society and a robust democracy.

An independent ABC is crucial to public interest journalism

4. The Walkley Foundation is making this submission because, along with all the media organisations we represent, the ABC is an important part of the Australian media ecosystem.

5. The ABC is consistently among Walkley finalists and winners and has been ever since radio reporting was included for recognition through award categories. This year alone there were 23 ABC finalists - radio, television and online - among the 90 shortlisted nominees across all categories.
6. In 2017 the ABC won six awards out of 30 categories - for international coverage, business reporting, as well as innovation, indigenous reporting, and the documentary category. The ABC shared an award for its work with Fairfax Media in exposing operational failures in aged care, which has prompted a royal commission.
7. This work is crucial public interest journalism and can only be generated through a supportive governance and management which adheres to the ABC Act's Section 8 (Duties of the Board) to safeguard the ABC's independence. Over the entirety of its history from 1956 the Walkley Award participants, both practitioners and media industry employers, and now through the Walkley Foundation itself, has been aware of the ABC's foundational influence on the professional development and high standards of Australian journalism. The Foundation is aware of the ABC Act's obligation on ABC directors through Section 8:

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 recognised standards of objective journalism.
8. Hopefully this Senate Environment and Communications References Committee inquiry into allegations of political interference at the ABC will establish the truth of the matter. If the allegations are substantiated, meaningful reform to strengthen the ABC Act can be made to guard against any political or vested interest in the future, either through the practice of party political or partisan "stacking" of the ABC Board or by executive government sidestepping the merit selection provisions of the ABC Act covering Board appointments. Through this inquiry the committee's attention may also be drawn to any evidence of politically motivated defunding, allegedly delivered for punitive or intimidatory pressure on the entity. If any such evidence is substantiated reforms to secure funding certainty for the ABC will become self-evidently needed.

9. At a time when news agencies in Australia face downsizing through disruption brought by the “digital revolution”, quality, independent journalism has never been more important. The Walkley Foundation submits this committee should note that the concept and reality of “free media” is threatened in many parts of the world, with the rise of the “fake news” or the misinformation and disinformation phenomenon.

10. In confronting this phenomenon the Walkley Foundation is committed to engaging the Australian public directly in raising consciousness about the benefits through exceptional examples of public interest journalism, including those delivered by a demonstrably independent ABC. This year the Walkley Foundation has reaffirmed its commitment to independent journalism through the launch of the Walkley Public Fund for Journalism, which will invest directly in public interest journalism. The Foundation will work with all its media industry partners, including the ABC. In that context this Senate inquiry can make a significant contribution to establishing the truth about any political interference and securing reforms to better protect ABC independence and this institution’s great contribution to our national life.

Quentin Dempster
Chair, Walkley Foundation Limited

