

Senate Inquiry Submission

Firstly, as Secretary of the ABC CPSU, I would like to take this opportunity to pass on the member's thanks for your support, interest and ongoing consideration in the matter of ABC regional production.

One of the hallmarks of the events that have lead to this inquiry is the ABC management's commitment to exclude the Tasmanian staff in consultation, forward planning or decisions at all levels of program making, particularly over the past six months. Members hope this inquiry will reveal the fundamental flaws in this approach which we believe has resulted in the wholesale dismantling of our capacity to produce quality programs, disenfranchised the staff and negatively impacted on Brand ABC in the public's perception of their public broadcaster. Regrettably, this scenario in Hobart is only the latest of such situations reflected across Australia in ABC Branches in Perth, Darwin & Brisbane.

In my experience managers consider staff to be either their greatest asset or recurring expense. Considering the constant, steady rate at which ABC management has reduced regional production staffing levels nationally over the past two years, there is no doubt management has considered the experienced and multiskilled production staff to be an impediment to the ongoing viability of the ABC despite decades of quality and cost effective inhouse productions which have won domestic and international acclaim. Our experience in Hobart has been a long, slow decline into an uncertain future with increasingly reduced guidance, communication or support from senior management.

The ABC Tasmania Production Unit and Field Operations staff have over the years made a wide variety of programs, differing in their budgets, formats, timeslots and genres. Productions have included educational, lifestyle, factual, documentary, drama, outside broadcasting of special events, sport and arts programming. Programs such as 'All in a Day's Work' and 'Fridge Door' were completely new formats created by the Unit. The enduring 'Gardening Australia' was born out of the earlier Hobart created program 'Landscape' which introduced Peter Cundall to the viewing audience. As funding to the ABC in the late 1990's became tighter, the Tasmanian Branch staff reacted, becoming multiskilled and through good local management was recognised as the most efficient Branch in the network.

In 2003 the Federal government passed on a tied grant to the ABC with the proviso the funds be spent only on production in regional Australia. Reacting to this, the ABC moved 'Gardening Australia' from Hobart where it had been successfully produced for 25 years and relocated it to Melbourne. It is interesting to note here 'Gardening Australia' has recently been commissioned for another series in 2013.

The Hobart Production Unit was asked to devise programming to replace 'Gardening Australia' and this resulted in two new programs, 'Second Opinion' and 'Collectors'. Towards the end of the first year, it was decided 'Second Opinion' would cease production but 'Collectors' was an unexpected success. It was moved to a primetime time slot and the Unit produced 42 x ½ hour programs a year with accompanying magazines and internet

site for the next 4 years. In 2009, management decided to only commission 16 episodes of 'Collectors'.

After this seven year run of success, TV management decided to "rest" 'Collectors', until now a term unused in television broadcasting. The Hobart production Unit was asked to submit program ideas and out of the "resting" 'Collectors', 'Auction Room' was created. The creation of a program from initial idea to on air broadcast is a convoluted and compromised journey. The difference between original submission and the finished 'Auction Room' style of production was enormous and the final format we were asked to work to was considered by the staff to be expensive, awkward and did not reflect Tasmania. This was discussed with management who decided the format was as required and the first series was completed.

Towards the end of this first series, staff became increasingly concerned regarding ongoing production commitments for Hobart. There was declining communication between staff and Sydney management to suggested what, if any, ongoing programs would be commissioned for the Production Unit.

Staff became so concerned as to the lack of commitment to the Production Unit and the viability of the Branch, with support from the CPSU and Friends of the ABC, we began a campaign to raise awareness in the general public of the looming situation. We approached State and Federal Members of Parliament and were most encouraged when all the Tasmanian Members passed a motion of support from the floor of Parliament for the ABC in Tasmania. The Members high lighted not just the production capacity of the Tasmanian Branch which seemed to be coming under threat but the ABC's broader community involvement which would also be affected. They also touched on the importance of the ABC in daily life in Tasmania, its role in connecting Australians and the quality of the programs it broadcasts. Concerns were also raised in Parliament as to how the ABC would honour its commitment to the Charter which stipulates that we, the ABC, reflect Australia back to Australians. Would the possible cuts mean Tasmania would be diminished in its representation, would we be lost altogether?

The ABC offers employment to a great number of the Tasmanian freelance technicians. Work experience, mentoring and some limited employment is available to college students studying media and TV production. Our production requirements means production equipment is here on the island and, when not being used for production, is available on the rental market to the industry.

Part of the CPSU campaign against the possible cut backs was to take our message to the people at Hobart's Salamanca Markets for two consecutive week ends. This proved to be a very worth while effort. Working with the Friends of the ABC and the CPSU, we prepared a letter addressed to the newly appointed ABC Chairman Jim Spigelman. These letters were made available to the public at the stall to read and, for those who felt strongly enough, to sign and were posted to the Chairman on their behalf. We also engaged with the public, answering their enquiries as best we could with the limited information we had at the time and again we were encouraged by the level of support for the staff and the ABC we received from the public. It is interesting to note at this point, at both week ends, staff members

turned up at the markets to help run the stall. We were, in a very real way, attempting to gather support for the ongoing viability of the Tasmanian Production Unit, its staff and to prevent what was perceived as possible looming cut backs or closure. The Production Unit and supporting Field Operations Department are staffed by a mature workforce. We have some employees who are in the early stages of their career through to more experienced and senior staff who are at the other end of their career pathways and a spread of staff members in between. Some of the more senior staff members are very close to retiring, possibly within the next year or two. For these members, a redundancy would be a welcome end of career "Thanks for your efforts" cheque and the continuation of the Production Unit would potentially cost them a redundancy payout. Such is the caliber of the people I work with these people still turned up at the stall on both week ends to campaign for the continuation of the Unit, to maintain the viability of the Branch and to keep our representation of Tasmania on the national stage.

Through this time in 2011, there were broad based changes sweeping across the ABC nationally. Perth's Production Unit and Melbourne's Arts and Drama Units were closed and redundancies handed to long serving, experienced staff. Sydney lost production staff and Darwin was told they were now a News and Current Affairs only Branch.

Local Tasmanian Sport was cut with no Tasmanian winter sport coverage broadcast planned. Despite repeated representations to management, Tasmanian staff eventually heard of the cuts to local sport by reading it in the local print media. In December of that year, Mark Scott travelled to Hobart and met with ABC staff. He pointed out the AFL had made a commercial deal to sell the TV broadcast rights for one billion dollars over 3 years and he would understandably like to have a share of these funds for the ABC to offset the cost of our ongoing football broadcasts in Tasmania.

Staff do not expect to have any exposure to the dealings of management in these matters. The day to day running of the ABC is obviously management's responsibility but the offer the ABC made to the Tasmanian State League to cover the 2011 winter football season seemed to us destined to fail.

It is widely understood the ABC's 2011 offer presented to the TSL was \$90,000 for the season, covering a game every second week and only from one field, North Hobart. This differs to the coverage the year before which was charged at \$50,000, a game every week including some from the north of the State and from a variety of fields in the south. Considering the size and condition of the TSL at the time, it is no surprise the ABC's offer was not accepted. After the staff were told football was not going to be covered, we are unaware of any attempts by management to engage any other sporting code in dialogue with view to perhaps covering a different sport that winter.

Staff contacted a variety of sporting officials across the State enquiring as to the possible coverage of their sports. We have previously successfully broadcast basketball, netball and hockey competitions. Several codes showed interest in discussing potential coverage that winter and these expressions of interest were directed to management in Sydney but I am unaware of any discussions that may have followed.

At Mark Scott's recent meeting with staff in November this year, he announced it is planned the Tasmanian Outside Broadcast van will be removed out of Tasmania and taken to Melbourne, decommissioned and used as spare parts for other ABC OB vans across Australia, effectively leaving Tasmania without a large capacity Outside Broadcast van on the island.

This van has been a critical piece of infrastructure to our production capability. Due to the small size of our studios in the Branch, 'Collectors' was shot in a converted warehouse in Hobart using the OB van as a transportable studio control room. Since the demise of 'Collectors' this studio has since been returned to use as a warehouse and leaves Tasmania without a studio of any practical size in the south of the State. Aside from the infrastructure the OB van represents, it will also take with it many future opportunities for Tasmanian employment and Tasmanian stories to be seen on the Australian stage. It will reduce the range and style of productions available to the Branch and diminish the technicians and operators skill levels. Some of the current staff who have worked in Outside Broadcasts for the ABC in Tasmania were able to travel to the mainland to be involved with the host broadcaster on the coverage of the Sydney Olympics on sports as diverse as hockey, bike riding and sailing. We have also sent our van and staff to the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne and it was the Tasmanian OB van that was broadcasting from Uluru when Australia celebrated on New Year's Eve 2000.

After the announced closure of the Production Unit, it became known to staff that in 2006 the Director of Television Department Kim Dalton had suggested to the Screen Producers Association of Australia he considered the ABC should not be in the business of producing so much of the content required for the network and he intended to outsource much of our then internal produced programming to the commercial sector.

On or about the 15th of December 2010, Kim Dalton travelled to Hobart to have a meeting with the then Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett. It is understood he offered to outsource 'Collectors' and whatever staff were needed to a Tasmanian commercial production house of Screen Tasmania's choosing for the consideration of \$4,000,000 from the Tasmanian government.

David Bartlett declined Mr Dalton's offer but only weeks later, after David Bartlett resigned and Lara Giddings was sworn in as Premier, Mr Dalton telephoned the new premier and again put forward his offer. Again, the Premier of the State declined his offer. This raises the question in my mind as to management's commitment to regional Tasmanian production at least as far back as 2010.

I am now involved as the ABC Tasmania CPSU Secretary in the consultation between management and staff regarding the proposed cuts to both the Production Unit and Field Operations of the Production Resources Department. Despite these discussions being well represented in the current ABC Enterprise Agreement under Part L Managing Change and Part M Redundancy, I suspect we would not be at the discussion table if the CPSU had not lodged a dispute with Fair Work Australia. Since the union lodged a dispute with FWA the

ABC has at least been talking to us about the decision to close Tasmania production, though they are yet to change anything about the situation and it looks unlikely that they will do so. Management representatives in the meetings have reiterated the decision announced by Mark Scott at the staff meeting in November to move one position from the Production Unit to the News Department leaving a total of eleven staff positions from the Production Unit and five from the Field Operations area marked for redundancy. I can only say I am disappointed in the outcomes of the talks to date. There does not appear to be any real effort from management to mitigate the effects of the cuts on staff other than the prescribed offer of either a redeployment to an advertised position somewhere in the ABC nationally or assistance of a six week job search supported by the ABC at the end of the talks. No concessions or alternatives have been offered and during the talks and it appears management would like to finalise consultation in the middle of January.

There has been a very clearly enounced funding problem within the organization and I have been left wondering if this cash shortfall would still be a problem if the ABC was not trying to sustain the News24 network from existing funding.

During discussions, we have been told the Production Unit costs the ABC \$1.5 million dollars a year to maintain and, at that cost, the 'Auction Room' episodes are too expensive and ratings too low to maintain. When the Unit was producing 42 'Collectors' episodes with the associated magazines and internet presence, the cost per episode was less than \$36,000. When the Unit was commissioned to produce 'Auction Room' we were initially asked to provide only ten episodes for series one, then eight episodes for series two. Despite staff pointing out;

- this was an expensive program to make outside of Tasmania, non of the episodes have been shot locally,
- the added cost of interstate travel,
- the program does not really represent Tasmania to Australians,
- the limited number of episodes per year will mean the amortized cost per program will be unreasonably high.

Over the time of production, the Unit's producers forwarded in excess of twenty alternate production ideas and scenarios. Despite numerous requests to senior management for guidance regarding audience, time slots, genres, demographics or budgets of possible future programs, staff were given almost no information or support to consider when preparing their submissions. This lack of involvement, support or guidance makes tailoring proposed programs incredibly difficult to preparing with any real hope of commissioning.

Lastly, I believe the appeal of closing internal production capacity and capability, making experienced and skilled in-house staff redundant and buying programs in from the commercial production sector is made all the more attractive to the ABC through the mechanism of subsidised co-productions. My understanding of the present model is the Federal government funds the ABC to create and run the National TV and Radio Broadcaster. This includes creating television programming in a mixed model of both

internal and external production, something the CPSU broadly supports. This funding for the National Broadcaster is paid for by the people of Australia and until recently has proven to be both successful and viable.

If the ABC is knowingly and purposely then pursuing co-productions from the commercial production market which recoups its production costs and a profit from a combination of sales and;

- commissioning payment from the ABC,
- screen money subsidy from Federal film funding bodies,
- screen money subsidy from state film funding bodies,

does this not mean the tax paying public are now paying for ABC programming three times where as, productions made within the ABC, are paid for only once with the possibility the ABC can then on sell the program, retain the copyrights and build a library which may also offer further sales?

These are fundamental questions which have been distilled from the past 2 years of campaigning to prevent any further cuts to the ABC's production capacity. The Australian public, our ultimate share holders, still hold the ABC in high regard. How much longer will Brand ABC maintain its value?

With thanks,
Phil Long
Secretary
ABC Tasmania CPSU

Hobart
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