



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation

Archbishop John Bathersby (Chairman)  
Bishop Ad Abikaram  
Bishop Joseph Grech  
Bishop Peter Ingham  
Bishop David Walker

Submission from the  
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

to

Senate Environment, Communication  
and the Arts Committee

Inquiry into the Effectiveness of  
the Broadcasting Codes of Practice



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation

Archbishop John Bathersby (Chairman)  
Bishop Ad Abikaram  
Bishop Joseph Grech  
Bishop Peter Ingham  
Bishop David Walker

### Preamble

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this important Inquiry. Broadcasting is part of every Australian's daily life. It informs us and influences many facets of our daily life. As such, it is imperative that appropriate standards of practice be maintained in broadcasting. Exactly what constitutes appropriate standards can be a matter of debate in a democratic society. The community consensus of such standards should be incorporated into the Broadcasting Code of Practice.

We agree that it is timely to have an "examination into the effectiveness of the Broadcasting Codes of Practice within the radio and television industry, with particular reference to:

- a. the frequency and use of coarse and foul language (swearing) in programs;
- b. the effectiveness of the current classification standards as an accurate reflection of the content contained in the program;
- c. the operation and effectiveness of the complaints process currently available to members of the public, and
- d. any other related matter."

We have spoken on many occasions about the moral questions involved in the portrayal of violence, sexuality, language, marriage and family life which we believe go beyond public opinion or changing community attitudes. And while we hold to our principles of Catholic morality, we are aware that in a democratic society the question "Is it moral?" is a different question from "Is it legal?" and that broadcasting codes issues hinge around public policy.

We would like to remind the inquiry that according to the last census (2006) a significant majority of Australians (64%) still describe themselves as Christians. We can assume from this identification that the majority of the nation's citizens share the values of the Christian churches.

In regard to this enquiry our recommendations are based on the venerable Catholic moral principle of informed consent. Informed Consent makes explicit the contract between the producer, the radio and television industry, the government and the consumer in special regard to the frequency and use of coarse and foul language, the current classification standards and the operation and effectiveness of the complaints process currently available to members of the public.

We hold that the consumer has every right to expect that the government will oversee that the broadcasting industry gives its consumers as much information as possible so that they can make an informed decision about their viewing choice.



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation

Archbishop John Bathersby (Chairman)  
Bishop Ad Abikaram  
Bishop Joseph Grech  
Bishop Peter Ingham  
Bishop David Walker

### Recommendations

1. The growing convergence in media means that the line between all audiovisual media is blurring. For the sake of easier consumer identification, consistent recognition, understanding of the categories and their meanings, and easier administration, **we recommend that there be a more uniform national approach, including a single set of classification standards, for the cinema, the radio and television industries.**

We believe this new national approach needs to have more categories, be more descriptive of the material and have, as an essential part of its strategy, an on-going community education programme about its content and meaning. We cannot see why the cinema, television and radio are treated under different expectations and outcomes.

**2. We recommend that a single, consistent set of classification symbols and categories be adopted, building on the already familiar ones used in film classification: G, G8+, PG, 13+, M15, MA15+, R18, RC.**

Parents are at the vanguard of decisions taken in regard to the broadcasting codes. Any assistance these codes can give them in terms of being stronger, clearer, more descriptive and consistent in the symbols and categories, the better. Parents need support in their task of protecting their children from material they judge to be harmful and from coarse and foul language.

We especially think that the splitting of G and G8+ categories will be helpful in guiding the best decision for families in regard to their children and their smallest children.

3. We recommend that greater attention be paid in the code to violence in the sound track of radio, television and film. The soundtrack can be one of the most influential aspects in the viewing experience, as it creates atmosphere and influences emotional responses. Especially with children, the visuals in G rated material may be acceptable but the sound track that accompanies them should change the classification of the film.

4. Specifically in regard to the frequency and use of coarse and foul language (swearing), we recommend that the broadcasting codes of practice across cinema, television and radio be clear, appropriate and adequate, and address the following issues:

- The present code speaks of swearing as “coarse language.” We argue that this is a serious category mistake. Such a term does not take into account the violent nature of language. Language described as ‘coarse’ can be seen as an assault against decorum. The presumption here can be that if an individual was of a wealthier class or more educated he or she would not use such language. This is, clearly, not true. Swearing is a violent action. The civil and criminal codes now recognise violent language as verbal abuse. **Therefore we recommend that the codes be brought into line with how**



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

## Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation

Archbishop John Bathersby (Chairman)  
Bishop Ad Abikaram  
Bishop Joseph Grech  
Bishop Peter Ingham  
Bishop David Walker

**language is described in other legal codes and describe it under the category of violence: low, medium or high level violent language.**

- **We recommend that there the code make provision for religiously offensive language. God, Jesus, Christ, Mohammed, Allah and Buddha** are not explicitly named in any radio or television broadcasting codes of practice, but the abuse of them in the media can be as offensive as violent language to many reasonable, adult, religious Australians.
- **We recommend that the code make provision for offensive shorthand terms which have become commonplace.** “You are a mother.....!” for example. Many people know what this term means even if the final word is not used.
- We draw the Inquiry’s attention to the imitability of language. The values enshrined in the Commonwealth Acts relating to anti-discrimination and vilification demonstrate the impact of imitability.

5. We recommend that government have a greater and easier process for feedback from the Australian public. **We recommend a national hotline number** be established for people to call and leave a verbal report on any audiovisual material about which they wish to complain or commend.

Before a programme is aired and in the press, **we recommend that the website of the body supervising the broadcasting codes of practise should be screened** telling consumers where they can provide feedback from their homes. We consider calling the switchboard of a radio or television station to be a wholly deficient practice.

The Catholic Church is committed within the framework of a liberal democracy to do all we can to promote broadcasting codes of practice which enable informed consent and promote human dignity, not just for adults but especially for the most vulnerable members of our community: our children and adolescents. Their needs and the needs of their parents must be given the highest priority in deciding the content, application and defence of the broadcasting codes of practice.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment upon these important matters. We wish the Committee well in its deliberations. If members of the Committee wish to discuss these matters further, we would be happy to do so. Our contact is Rev Fr Richard Leonard SJ, Director, Australian Catholic Office for Film & Broadcasting (ph (03) 9342 1834, mob 0409 120 928, or email; [richard.leonard@bigpond.com](mailto:richard.leonard@bigpond.com) ).

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference  
1 May 2008

