

SUBMISSION TO SENATE STANDING REFERENCES
COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATIONS,
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS.

On: “The development and implementation of options for methods of appointment to the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that would enhance public confidence in the independence and representativeness of the ABC as the national broadcaster.”

BY

WALTER BASS
FOUNDING PRESIDENT
FRIENDS OF THE ABC

22 July 2001

1. Preamble

For some time now the ABC has been in a constant state of turmoil. Staff numbers have been decimated, morale is at rock bottom, valuable personnel, both artistic and administrative, have been retrenched or have left in disgust. Audiences have fallen because of poor programming due to a lack of funds.

For the first time in its history the ABC appears to be represented by a minister who does not have its interests as his primary concern, indeed, a minister whose brief appears to be to damage the Corporation.

The minister's tenure has been marked by the destruction, (on the pretext of a paltry saving), and subsequent belated resurrection of Radio Australia. More importantly, the minister's tenure has seen the complete politicisation of the board, and the appointment of a CEO, Jonathan Shier, with no public broadcasting experience, but with experience as an ex-Liberal Party official.

In his brief period in office, Mr Shier has dismissed some of the ABC's best executives for reasons which would be difficult to explain except in political terms. If further proof of this is required, it might lie in the fact that many of these executives were dismissed before the CEO could possibly have gauged their performance for himself.

It was, in fact, widely reported and not, to my knowledge, denied, that Mr Shier began the search for replacement executives before he actually took up his position.

1.1

Since, as the saying goes, "the fish stinks from the head", it is necessary to blame the current chaos at the ABC onto the board which appointed Mr Shier.

Apart from the Staff Elected Member, all members of the current board are appointments of the present Government. The chairman is well known to be a close personal friend of the Prime Minister, and was shown by the latter's somewhat injudiciously fulsome praise of the former at an even more injudicious appearance at a Liberal Party fund raising function.

For the chairman of a body constantly under attack by the Howard Government, Mr McDonald's appearance at the dinner caused considerable dismay amongst ABC supporters.

Under these circumstances, and from what has been published in the press since the accession of Mr Shier, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that the present board's agenda is to "blandify" and dumb-down the ABC, and to tame the ABC's current affairs output to make it more like the commercial networks' trivial efforts.

Also, plans for cheap "infotainment" programs similar to the commercial sector's efforts don't fill ABC supporters with confidence.

Mr Shier's abortive attempt to pull the Four Corners program scheduled for 16 July, a program which will cause great embarrassment to several Liberal Party functionaries, has not done much to dispel public suspicion of Mr Shier's political agenda.

It is hardly surprising that the public cried foul when such a decision was made by a CEO with past service in the Liberal Party.

- 1.2 This state of affairs at the ABC is not new. It has become the norm that with each change of the party in government, ABC staff have been required to cope with a *volte face* in direction at the whim of various CEOs, each trying to make their mark as a new broom, each wreaking havoc at the Corporation with the approval of a board of political appointees, some good, most with nothing to contribute except being a friend or political debtor of someone in office.
- The coming of Mr Shier, however, would appear to be the last straw. His complete lack of knowledge of public broadcasting has resulted in the ABC's lurching from one crisis to another. Faced with this shambles, audience numbers have plummeted, the staff is completely demoralised, and the ABC faces endless bad publicity in the media.
- It is now becoming obvious to all that under the present regime, headed by a minister whose agenda appears to be to destroy or emasculate the ABC, a board which appears to be prepared to help him carry out his wishes, and an inexperienced CEO who is obviously out of his depth, and who has, for no rational reason, divested the ABC of some of its finest and most loyal executives, the Corporation is heading for the point of no return.
2. Although the problem of ensuring that a truly independent board is appointed to run the ABC is by no means insoluble, the major parties have, up until now, shown a singular lack of political will to bring this about. There has been much lip service to the importance of the ABC's "independence", but no action to make it a reality.

3. **Suggested Method of Appointing Board Members.**

It would appear that the ideal ABC board should consist of members who:

- (i) Have a sound background in aspects of public broadcasting. Or,
- (ii) Have some other qualification which gives them something to contribute to the ABC.
- (iii) Have no party political affiliations.
- (iv) Are long time residents in Australia.

4. Appointments can be made in the following way.

- (i) Vacancies for board positions should be advertised in the media.
- (ii) Applications supported by a CV or similar statement should be scrutinised by an all party committee of parliament which will prepare a short list of candidates .
- (iii) Those on the short list will then appear for interview before a joint sitting of both houses of parliament.
- (iv) Appointments will be made by a two thirds majority vote of the members and senators at that sitting.
- (v) The new board will then elect its own chairman.
- (vi) Terms of office will remain as at present.

4.1 The position of staff elected member will remain.

4.2 The CEO should no longer be a member of the Board.

While it is common business practice for the CEO to be automatically a board member, in the case of the ABC this could be counter productive because:

- (i) A separation of the board from the executive would bring an independence of thought to the two top tiers of ABC management.
- (ii) Past experience has shown that CEOs have tended to dominate board proceedings and, on occasions intimidated board members and chairmen.

5 Conclusion

While there is nothing particularly novel in the method suggested, there are certainly grounds for pessimism as to the chances of this or any other method of appointing a truly independent board ever being adopted.

Each member of the committee should have received a copy of an email setting out my suggestion some months ago, but I have to say that I have been underwhelmed at the response.

The replies fell into the standard pattern – referrals to the Shadow Minister and motherhood statements from the Opposition, and the anticipated silence from the Government. Only one Senator addressed my suggestion in any kind of intelligent way.

It does appear that the time has come for the parties to put the interests of the nation before nepotism, cronyism and just plain self interest.

The ABC is the only media organisation which has the independence to let daylight into the political, financial and business processes of Australia. That's what makes it such a vital part of the democratic processes of our country. If further proof is required, one only has to point to the various parties' reluctance to give the Corporation real independence.

It is to be hoped that, in the not too distant future reason will prevail.

**Walter Bass
44 Holmes St
TURRAMURRA
NSW 2074.
Phone/fax: [REDACTED]
Email: [REDACTED]**