

The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts References Committee
S1.57 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY ON ABC BOARD APPOINTMENTS

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We wish to state our strong conviction that a properly funded and independent public broadcaster is a basic necessity to a free and democratic society.

Education and knowledge in any community lead to improved standards of living and richer cultures. The ABC provides a wide range of educational, cultural and documentary programming around Australia and overseas. Many Australians will vouch for the enormous influence the ABC has had on their education, cultural knowledge and entertainment.

In those countries, which do not have public broadcasting, human rights become eroded and equal access to knowledge and services decline. In those countries where the public broadcaster accepts paid commercial advertising, the quality and balance of programs has deteriorated.

It is the duty of the Australian ABC Board to ensure ABC independence in all matters. The current Board has shown bias by not protesting against government criticism of the ABC's independence.

It is the duty of the Board to ensure adequate funding for the ABC to carry out its charter. Why has the current Board not complained strongly against severe funding cuts over the last few years?

We have lost confidence in the ABC Board, the Chairman and the CEO who was appointed by the Board.

Why for example did not the Board ask Mr Shier at his interview why he was inexplicably unemployed for a year? Why has the Board allowed the cutting and removal of highly acceptable programs like Quantum and cuts to other science programs, especially at a time when there appears to be a reducing public interest in science education?

ABC Chairman, Donald McDonald, in an address to the Melbourne Media Club on 3 September 1999 said this:

“Unlike our counterparts in Canada and New Zealand the ABC’s television service has never been saddled with commercial advertising. Free of advertising, the ABC is much more able to freely program material that otherwise might not be screened because it might not be attractive as an advertising vehicle.

To put it bluntly, Australians would no longer be able to recognise in New Zealand and Canada, public broadcasting of the style of the ABC or BBC.”

We quote this because there is real concern that the current Board will introduce some form of commercial advertising. One only needs to look at the composition of the Board to understand our concern. Why is there a need for so many people associated with the stock market, business, finance, banking, insurance, and several members with commerce degrees? Surely only one person with these education and business experiences is required. Where are the representatives of user groups (IT **IS** OUR ABC), the education sector, science research, academia, rural organisations, Aborigines and so on?

And what about women? Two out of eight is not good enough. The education and care of Australia’s youth is mainly the responsibility of women. So why are they not properly represented on this Board?

For these reasons, we believe it is essential to develop a different mode of appointment to the Board. **We suggest the following method:**

1. The Board needs to have twelve members and a chairman
2. Candidates must not be members of any political party
3. At least one member must be from the Indigenous community
4. Each state government recommends three men and three women from a wide variety of backgrounds.
5. OR advertisements in all state, local and national newspapers calling for nominations.
6. The Federal Parliament will then select the final twelve members and a chairman out of the state or public nominees.
7. The selection process needs to be done in three parts, one for women, one for men and one for Aborigines, to ensure that there are at least six women Board members and one Indigenous person.
8. The selection process will be by exhaustive ballot
9. Candidates lobbying politicians will be disqualified
10. The Senate must approve all the appointments.

Obviously, not being expert in such selection matters, the above proposal requires modification. That is for others to decide. We place it before you as a possible option to work from.

We request that this short submission be given serious consideration.