

Submission by the

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

to the

**Senate Environment, Communications, Information
Technology and the Arts References Committee's**

inquiry into

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.

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The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the national peak body representing Australia's 142,423 postgraduate students. It has affiliated postgraduate associations in 34 of Australia's public higher education institutions and in all States and Territories. CAPA conducts research, policy analysis and advocacy on behalf of its members and in the interests of Australian higher education generally. It works closely together with the other major representative bodies in the higher education sector, including the National Union of Students, the National Tertiary Education Union, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, the Group of 8, and the four learned Academies. CAPA engages in public debate through parliamentary processes, engagement with the media, participation in conferences and public meetings, the generation of issue papers, and through the support of the activities of its constituents and peer peak bodies.

CAPA therefore maintains a keen interest both in the continuing role of community bodies in public life, and in the integrity and credibility of the means by which such a role may be realised. An independent, adequately funded and politically unbiased national broadcaster is one of the most important means by which public debate and discussion can take place in Australia without fear or favour, and without the accommodations of interest and private opinion that may characterise the editorial choices made in the commercial media.

Like the dispensation of justice, though, independence must not only be maintained, but must be *seen* to be maintained, if credibility is to be preserved. Accordingly, CAPA commends the Senate for its consideration of the urgent question of the means by which the process of appointment to the ABC Board may be improved, not only to further guarantee their integrity, but also to improve their credibility in the public perception. Even the best appointment, made under legitimate but opaque circumstances, becomes subject to public suspicion, and must result in the erosion of public confidence in the operation of the ABC.

CAPA recognises that political indifference is neither possible nor desirable in the national broadcaster – rather political balance ought to be the aim, resulting in political *disinterest* (which is not at all the same thing). Furthermore, there are many shades of meaning in the term ‘political’, and only some of them have to do with parties, parliament and the machinery of government. That which operates in the social realm is always already political, and the circulation of ideas concerning issues as diverse as women’s rights, the sovereignty of this country’s original inhabitants, and freedom of worship or sexual orientation has a life in social discourse that is anterior to – but continuous with – the parliamentary political realm.

It is their capacity for participation in the life of the nation as it is lived at this social level – within this understanding of the term ‘political’ – that is the most significant feature of national, publicly owned media such as the ABC and SBS. Inevitably, the conduct of vigorous debate around controversial issues that deeply affect the lives of many Australians will have implications for the directions taken in that arena we conventionally call politics. This is both proper and beneficial, but such an arrangement is vulnerable to that deadly temptation of office; to send a little political suasion down the line in the opposite direction, for reasons that are not always entirely pure.

The appointment of strong, diverse, representative and publicly minded individuals to the ABC Board is a powerful antidote not only to the possibility of such inappropriate or corrupt influence, but also to the appearance of its possibility. Such appointments need not be politically inert individually – indeed, sound, relevant appointments seldom would be – but they should certainly be politically balanced collectively. However, appointments should not be employees or office-bearers of political parties, serving parliamentarians, or individuals overwhelmingly associated with a particular party.

Appointees should be drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds, and particular attention should be given to the creation and preservation of such diversity. That is, considerable efforts should be made to ensure that the typical over-representation of rich, connected white blokes in suits is diminished somewhat, and that other significant groups in the life of the nation are afforded representation. Groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recent immigrants, gay and lesbian people, youth, retirees, the unemployed, people from rural Australia, and those from the outer suburbs are hardly conspicuous in their participation in the management of public institutions, yet their experiences of life are profoundly affected by them. It is time we put some more effort into soliciting their participation in the society and polity that shapes their lives.

Particular attention should be paid to the community service credentials of those given the honour of appointment to the ABC Board. For too long, the guidance of public institutions has been entrusted to those whose community credentials are either scant, or of a notably contrived nature. The majority ownership of a telecommunications company, the possession of board seats on a handful of prominent companies, and the inheritance of a significant family fortune are hardly guarantors of the sort of public-mindedness that the stewardship of the national broadcaster requires.

Rather, participation in public life – through community groups, education, responsible journalism and individual leadership (for example) – should be an essential criterion for appointment. Prominence should not be the key attribute, but rather leadership and a dedication to the public interest must be evident attributes of any serious candidate. Obviously the capacity for sound judgement and the ability to work together with other Board members – sometimes of quite different backgrounds and beliefs – are necessary as well. However, the appeal to expertise is too often a cover employed to justify the appointment to governing bodies of public institutions – universities, say – of people who do not hold dear the public interest or a sense of public responsibility. Given the wealth of talented and successful individuals active in Australian public life, the satisfaction of both criteria - community spirit and sound judgement – is easily attainable.

In practical terms, then, CAPA recommends that:

1. Guidelines for appointment must include reference to community service and the advancement of public institutions as essential criteria, alongside a record of prudential management and sound judgement;
2. Nominations that are endorsed or submitted by community groups should be accorded particular weight;
3. Representatives of community groups should be consulted in the selection process, and should be able to nominate members to a selection advisory panel; and, to this end,
4. A community group consultation body should be established in order to facilitate the contribution of community groups to the operation of public institutions – including the ABC, universities, regional health boards, etc. – that would not pretend to replace the representative mandate of government, but rather to beneficially supplement it by offering the means for the provision of informed community advice prior to or during the formulation and implementation of policy, rather than as a response after the fact.

It is CAPA's view that the adoption of these recommendations would result not only in a more credible and independent ABC, but also in the establishment of a paradigm that could govern the operation of many more of our public institutions, some of which are presently captive to interests of a distinctly private nature, and consequently to necessary but divisive internal strife and public opprobrium.