

# News+Views

Issue 37 / Spring 2011

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## Privatising the public broadcaster

# Shutting down ABC TV production

The latest cuts come to an already de-skilled ABC.

by Quentin Dempster



At last the hidden agenda has been exposed. The outsourcing of ABC television production to the commercial sector now covers all drama, documentary, natural history, most feature programming and, increasingly, studio-based light entertainment.

Through a long and deliberate board and management policy to dismantle and de-skill internal television production, the ABC is now totally dependent on the commercial television production sector for almost all Australian non-news content.

What's wrong with that? Our creative independence is being crushed out of us along with a conduit for diversity and originality nurtured in a creative training ground. The ABC cannot be truly independent unless it has a capacity to create and produce its own programming. The public trust in the ABC is based on an expectation that we are independent of commercial influence. We are not.

Many programs are commissioned with external co-funders on the basis of their saleability to pay TV and other commercial operators after a showing on the ABC, leaving little room for public purpose and innovation. The result is largely formulaic TV, Reader's Digest documentary or lightweight programming pitched at an AB demographic.

The taxpayers who fund the ABC deserve better. If our drama and other programming mimics the commercial networks, the ABC's *raison d'être* is destroyed.

There needs to be an inquiry into the siphoning of public funds to the commercial sector to establish the facts about the compromising of the ABC's public purpose. As taxpayer funds are involved, full transparency of these commercial activities should be mandatory. ABC managing director Mark Scott should be asked to explain how his claim that the ABC existed because of "market failure" can be reconciled with a program commissioning model that abandons in-house production.

The destruction of the ABC's creative independence has a long history. When the Hawke and Keating governments slashed funding, the ABC began a regime

of co-productions in drama. By the mid-1990s, the ABC no longer produced any drama in-house.

The co-production model then moved to other genres, pursued by heavy lobby pressure on government from the commercial television production sector. The in-house natural history unit was soon gone, followed by documentary.

The commercial sector intensified its lobby efforts in the Howard era to get an ever bigger slice of ABC programming. The ABC does not publish any detailed data on the share of production funds, so supporters and critics could follow the debate based on established facts.

While Australia needs a viable commercial television production sector, its siphon now clamped onto the ABC compromises the ABC's efforts and limits independent creative ABC production.

In the digital revolution, Australians can download any content from any domestic and international source. National boundaries are smashed. The Gillard government has a 'convergence review' under way. The commercial channels want to be relieved of legislated local content quota obligations.

The need for a broadcaster to support national interest and cultural objectives could become greater than ever before. But the ABC, without public discussion, has allowed its skills base and creative culture to be eroded.

As taxpayer funds are diverted to the commercial sector, the ability of the ABC to deliver on its public mandate is reduced. It is this trend that must be urgently confronted.

Quentin Dempster is a distinguished ABC journalist and a former staff-elected director. An unedited version of his article was first published in *The Age* 4.10.2011 and can be viewed at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)



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# Destruction of ABC TV Arts

As ABC management redirects more ABC resources to outsourcing, it has decided to axe the ABC's sole TV arts magazine program, and disband the national broadcaster's TV arts unit.

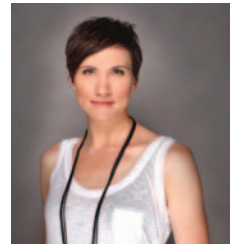
Tim Winton, Nick Cave, Betty Churcher, Geoffrey Rush and Elizabeth Ann Macgregor are among a group of eminent Australians involved in the arts who are dismayed and outraged at the ABC's act of cultural vandalism. Together with Friends of the ABC and a long list of other esteemed Australians, including State Premiers Barry O'Farrell and Mike Rann, the Mayors of Melbourne and Sydney, leading scientist Sir Gustav Nossal, human rights lawyer Julian Burnside, football legend Ron Barassi, and former Reserve Bank head Bernie Fraser, they wrote to the ABC Board:

*For the past fifty years, ABC TV has introduced Australians to an array of extraordinary local artists – from Sir Robert Helpmann to Kate Grenville, from the emerging Western Desert artists to Nick Cave.*

*The ABC TV arts unit has taken us into our galleries, theatres and museums, sharing the country's evolving cultural life. In the last year alone, the unit produced over 500 stories. It has championed new artists, engaged practitioners, and built a vast record of the work of those who strive to articulate our place in the world. Where else do we turn to celebrate our great artists? When we mourned Dame Joan Sutherland, and Margaret Olley, the ABC helped us pay tribute to their lives and work.*

*We are deeply disturbed by ABC management's plan to axe ABC TV's only arts magazine program, disband the TV arts unit and divert resources to prime time, populist content in pursuit of ratings. It will diminish the ABC's irreplaceable role as the nation's cultural memory. And sadly, it will reflect no glory whatsoever on what was once considered the single greatest achievement of Australia's intellectual and artistic life: the ABC itself.*

*Without a strong in-house unit to create and to commission arts programming, the national broadcaster will fail its charter responsibilities. And it will fail us, by not reminding us that our national character is informed and shaped by the imagination and creativity of artists.*



**Fenella Kernebone – Art Nation presenter**

A team of specialist arts programmers is critical to the ABC's capacity to create and commission quality arts programming. Without an arts unit, the ABC's role as the nation's cultural archivist, a chronicler of our greatest artistic achievements, will be seriously diminished. And who will be left to advocate for arts programming within a public broadcaster that is increasingly directing its limited resources to populist programs produced outside the ABC?

The list of 66 prominent Australians who wrote to the ABC Board can be viewed at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

## Radio National

# RN 2012 – the good and the very bad



Radio National has released its draft schedule for 2012.

Two important programs from the past which deal with media matters and religion will be reintroduced. Most existing meritorious programs will return. However, some will not. One valuable program missing from RN's draft schedule is *The National Interest*, which examines significant policy issues and is ably presented by Peter Mares.

Contrary to the strong interest that RN listeners have for distinct specialist programs, some time blocks in the 2012 draft line-up have been subverted in favour of increased generalist and flow programming. Specialist weekday programs in the 8.30am timeslot, like the *Law Report* and the *Health Report*, will be moved to 5.30 in the afternoon. The *Breakfast* program will be extended to 9.00am, and a new *Drive* program run from 6 – 8.00pm. *PM*, the most important radio round up of daily current affairs at the end of the day, will be cut to 30 minutes.

The Age estimated that if RN's changes proceed, RN will reduce its arts programming by 16.5 percent to become under 19 hours a week, excluding music programs. RN audiences are already expressing their



**At a time when Australia needs to learn more about its neighbours, missing from Radio National's 2012 schedule is the Asia Pacific program.** Photo by Rob Gullan

strong disapproval of the proposal to axe the *Artworks* program and merge arts into the *The Book Show*, which will become the hour-long Arts and Books program. They rightly expect RN to maintain arts programming that covers a range of art forms and keep its distinct and excellent books program.

More information is contained in RN's draft 2012 program schedule and FABC's letter to ABC Radio head Kate Dundas, which can be viewed at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

You may want to let the ABC know your views on its proposed changes.

# Inquiry into ABC TV

In August, the Senate announced an inquiry into recent ABC television programming decisions. The inquiry followed the ABC's decision to axe *Art Nation*, *Talking Heads* and *The New Inventors*, 'rest' *Collectors*, and to shut down its TV arts unit and production facilities which cover local sport and other events in some states. The ABC plans to divert resources it saves from these cuts to more outsourced production. The reasons cited for the changes were: "falling audiences" and the ABC's interest to "focus its limited financial resources on prime-time programming". In other words, ratings.

## The Inquiry

The view of the largest body which represents ABC staff is that ABC television has lost its way. It is chasing a mass audience rather than distinctive programming, Graeme Thomson, ABC secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union claimed in evidence to the Senate inquiry.

Friends of the ABC submitted that the commercial emphasis now a feature of sections of the ABC is contrary to the spirit of the ABC Act, and that this trend threatens the essential character of the ABC – its independence and integrity.

The private production sector, which benefits financially from ABC outsourcing, variously argued about program production that they can do it as well or better than the ABC and ABC audiences can't tell the difference anyway. Its representation included *The Chaser's* Julian Morrow.

In its submission, ABC management moved between explaining that government financial support of the private production sector made it more cost-effective for the ABC to outsource and seeking to play down the extent to which ABC production is being shut down.

## Inquiry findings

The Senate committee inquiry into recent ABC television programming decisions has called on the Communications Minister to implement processes that will ensure value for money, transparency and skill retention at the ABC.

The inquiry found the increasing use of external producers has the capacity to diminish the ABC's independence and skill base. It wants the ABC to maintain, and recommended that government funding take account of the need for, quality in-house production in all states.

Included in the Inquiry's findings were recommendations that the ABC set out in detail where it sees its future as a broadcaster and a content producer, with reference to its responsibilities to reflect Australia's cultural and regional diversity and to balance programs of wide appeal and specialist interest.

The Committee also proposed the ABC outline its strategy to meet its obligation to encourage and promote arts, given its plan to disband the ABC TV arts unit.

Some Committee members went further. Australian Greens Senators Ludlam and Wright recommended the ABC conduct an external audit of its program commissioning model, retain a team of specialist arts programmers and adopt a mandated proportion of regional content on ABC television.



**James O'Loughlin – *New Inventors* presenter before it was axed**

Senator Xenophon recommended the ABC's August announcement of forced staff redundancies be reversed and the level of ABC internal program production be restored to at least 2010 levels. He wants future funds for two existing ABC project areas that have a regional focus to be quarantined to states outside NSW and Victoria.

FABC's submission to the Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions can be viewed at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

The Government and the ABC are not required to act on the recommendations of a parliamentary inquiry. The community will need to maintain pressure on them if they want the ABC to maintain the capacity to produce programs which are a clear alternative to commercial TV.



## LEFT:

The ABC is paying the *Chaser* team's production company Giant Dwarf \$1.2 million for *The Hamster Wheel* (\$150,000 per episode for the eight-part series), as well as providing production staff and facilities. The total cost of \$3.2m (\$400,000 per half-hour episode) makes this co-production one of the most expensive shows on the ABC.

In contrast, the costs for two weekly internally produced half-hour programs which the ABC decided to axe are: *Collectors* \$122,000 per episode and *Art Nation* \$2 million a year.

# Footy and the ABC – more than a game by Grant Dorrington

The local football team is the cornerstone of some communities, the one organisation over which everyone unites. And to have the team featured on ABC television cements its social importance. This coverage is especially significant in Western Australia where vast distances can make travel to football games difficult.



The ABC has had a strong relationship with local West Australian football for over 27 years. Its high quality coverage of the state-wide football competition provides more than just an opportunity for audiences to watch their favourite team in action. Football is part of the fabric of WA and telecasts by the ABC extend its tentacles in areas of society which are valuable in the lives of many West Australians.

Take, for example, the story of Nic Naitanui, a symbol of the multicultural nature of our country who is now a rising AFL star. Local ABC coverage instilled a sense of community pride in the Western Australian suburb of Midvale where Nic settled on arrival from Fiji and began playing football. When a young boy in an outlying town in Western Australia is shown on ABC television it generates a sense of achievement for him and for his community.

The ABC's coverage of local football is equally important in the lives of the many talented indigenous footballers, some from regional areas of WA. When an indigenous player from One Arm Point, a remote Aboriginal community in the Kimberley region, came to Perth to play, the entire community stopped to watch the ABC's telecast. Televised games allow the families and friends of players to watch their progress.

Local ABC broadcasts have a style and approach that distinguishes the public broadcaster from commercial sports coverage.

Through their local knowledge and genuine interest in the players and the communities from which they come, ABC commentators connect with audiences

In the half-time match break the ABC moves beyond the match. Commentators may interview and showcase a player who is doing well or feature another aspect of the game, women's football for example. Or they might report on local community issues. The ABC has reported on programs in which football is a major vehicle for encouraging indigenous children to attend school. These initiatives have been successful in fostering school attendance and those running the programs work with the ABC to ensure local boys and girls can watch state football and see their role models in action. It has covered football activities for people with intellectual disabilities.

Together with the ABC, the West Australian Football Commission has linked into programs such as road safety and suicide-prevention. It has provided mentors to engage with local communities in an effort to address suicide, which is a major problem in many parts of regional Australia, and the ABC has promoted public awareness of these activities.

Football is a uniquely local game. In covering local football, the ABC is helping to maintain our cultural heritage. It is also enriching the lives of many Australians and generating significant community benefit.



Grant Dorrington is the Director of Football at the West Australian Football Commission

*As the result of strong community outrage, for the present time, it looks as if the ABC has backed away from earlier plans to cut its local football coverage in states including Western Australia. But the ABC has made it clear that it needs a greater contribution to production costs from the sports clubs involved, which raises another concerning issue: Are some groups in the community being disadvantaged because they have a lesser capacity to contribute to the cost of the ABC covering their area of interest?*

## FABC Notices

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### [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

WEBSITE MANAGER: Peter Monie

News + Views and more is available. Subscribe to receive free email updates at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

Facebook: Friends of the ABC (Vic)

Twitter: @FriendsoftheABC

### Useful contacts

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Prime Minister, Parliament House, Canberra 2600

ABC- phone: (03) 9626 1500, GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001

Maurice Newman – Chairman, ABC Board;

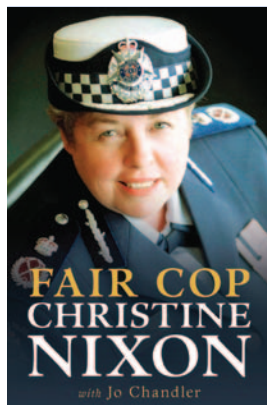
Mark Scott – ABC Managing Director

Feedback on programming and services:

[www.abc.net.au/contact](http://www.abc.net.au/contact)

## eBay – seller wanted

FABC is investigating ways to earn income and is considering establishing a system to sell on eBay items that are donated to it FABC by members. We are keen to hear from someone experienced at buying and selling on eBay who may be interested to operate such a project if FABC proceeds.



## Christine Nixon

GUEST SPEAKER 2011 AGM

Friday 18 November  
Iwaki Auditorium, ABC Southbank  
Meeting at 6.45 for 7pm start.  
Speaker at 8pm. Public welcome