

its regulatory and assistance strategies. The consumer would benefit from both a quantitative and qualitative increase in program choice as well as from greater precision in program pricing. (4)

Measured against this sort of scenario the ABC's resistance to structural and functional change has been quaintly anachronistic. Its position has been to seek to maintain, enhance or expand the output of its existing services. Nowhere does it tackle the question of its future role nor its likely relative position in the totality of Australian media, concentrating instead on achieving improved efficiency.

Not that the need for streamlining should be understated. Operational and administrative sloppiness have, more than anything else, been responsible over the past decade for the declining quality of the ABC's output. The problem is that by the time this new, lean, efficient ABC is achieved (and its own proposed reforms will take, on the ABC's best estimate, at least five years) the rest of the industry will have changed so radically that the ABC will, in relative terms, have almost stood still.

Unfortunately, in their various attempts to restructure or revitalise the Australian electronic media, successive Governments have tended to approach the problem on a sectoral basis. Seldom have policies or changes adequately reflected the complex inter-relationships between public and private sectors or the sub-componentry of each.

The latest Department Review is consistent with that approach. At the time of its preparation Government assistance to the film industry was being reviewed by another Department. Television constitutes far and away the most important single market for Australian film - itself heavily assisted through State and Federal budgets. The issue appears to have counted for little in the development of policies for the National Broadcaster.

Similarly, the development of Public (Community) Broadcasting is virtually ignored in the Departmental Review papers released so far. Yet test transmissions are now being undertaken in Melbourne and Sydney by Public TV groups and a substantial number of radio licences have already been granted to local community-based operators. Is it seriously assumed that there is no potential policy conflict between these sectors?

The point is that publicly-funded broadcasting (i.e. the ABC and SBS) can only ever be justified on the basis of its usefulness to the society that bears its cost. When any of its roles and functions are fulfilled by other broadcasters its level of usefulness is correspondingly diminished. As new technology, shifts in markets and changes in culture generate a proliferation of new electronic media outlets,

the public sector will need to find new and very specific roles to survive. If, as seems to be its intention, it clings, however efficiently, to the status quo, it will effectively engineer its own irrelevance and demise.

Notes:

- (1) Department of Transport & Communications. Review of National Broadcasting Policy Discussion Papers: Australian Broadcasting Service; Consultants' Reports - SBS Television 1988
- (2) Castles, Stephen "A New Agenda in Multiculturalism", Clearing House on

Migration Issues, Melbourne, June 1987, p.4

- (3) Sheldrake, Peter. Multiculturalism - Policy Considerations; address to Committee of Review, Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services Seminar, 1986
- (4) H.M.S.O. London. Report on the Committee on Financing the BBC July 1986

*Huw Evans is a Sydney-based broadcaster and media consultant.*

## Friends of the ABC

# Our culture and national identity: The ABC of it

---

**Long-time friend of the ABC, Leila Cumming considers the Review of National Broadcasting Policy has dire consequences for the future of the public service broadcaster**

---

**T**he main proposal in the recent Review of National Broadcasting Policy by Gareth Evans is to drastically reduce the size of the ABC and to make it a 'complementary broadcaster'. That is, a broadcaster providing only those types of programs which other broadcasters do not provide and limiting its broadcasting to certain carefully defined types of program. This policy goes completely against the 65 year history of the ABC.

Funding of the ABC has always been predominantly by the Commonwealth Government. Funds have been cut since 1976, with considerable staff losses, and 9000 more are to go in the next five years. At the same time the ABC will pay about \$30m from its funding for the satellite. Funding in 1986/7 was \$325.6m and the total revenue was \$43.6m.

Senator Evans, in an address 'Guaranteeing the ABC's Future' describes its Charter as containing 'confusion and general lack of direction' and claims that 'The Charter should be an explicit contract with the Parliament' but instead is 'a mixture of high sounding rhetoric and generalised directives which between them, give little or no guidance to the ABC as to what it should be actually doing...'

Concern about the need for clear interpretation of the Charter had already been expressed by the previous Board of Directors and in 1985 they published *The Role of a National Broadcaster in Contemporary Australia* giving such an interpretation. They added a warning, however, that 'An appropriate philosophy for a public service broadcaster such as the ABC must not be didactic in ways that unduly restrict the passions, artistic freedom or creativity of its staff and'... the ABC's philosophy must also provide an ethos - an atmosphere or sense of purpose - to encapsulate the organisation's commitment to the community it serves'.

---

### The proposals in more detail

---

Under the new Evans Policy the programs to which the ABC would be confined are defined narrowly so as to allow only one interpretation and would be the ABC's Charter responsibilities - the things it must do. These include news and current affairs as a priority, drama, the arts, children, educational, information and political matter. These areas would be funded primarily from the Budget within the context of 'agreed multi-year Plans'

but would be 'capable of supplementation'. The new charter would be 'an explicit contract with the Parliament'. There might also be non-charter programs such as light entertainment, sports, family activities and religious matter, whose funding might be negotiated year-to-year but might be supplemented by other means, for example, sponsorship. The rest of the ABC's present activities are classed as 'peripheral' and bear 'no clear-cut or direct relationship to the ABC's main purpose'. They include Radio Australia, the orchestras, public concerts, parliamentary broadcasting, transmitting stations and earth stations and they would be either transferred to other organisations or wound up. Even marketing might be 'contracted out'.

### The possible drawbacks

Some of the proposals resemble those being advocated by Huw Evans. For example, in the March 1986 Quadrant he wrote, 'The orchestras should be hived off and separately administered. Radio Australia likewise should become a separate, efficient utility.' Evans, however, went much further, recommending that national (nationwide) broadcasting should be abandoned too. 'I believe the ABC is destined to become our ... regional and community broadcaster ... Nothing need prevent the new ABC from pooling some of its resources to maintain a national news and information service. But its essential role should be to provide a distinctive and specific service, communicating imaginatively regional and local affairs and culture...' How crippling this could be is indicated by the ABC's own reminder in the 1976 Green Report that, 'The single importance of the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Australian life is that it is the one national information service.'

Implications of the Evans Policy for the quality of broadcasting in Australia are not very good. For 65 years the ABC has been an expression of our national culture which all the people in the cities, the towns, the countrysides and the remote outback, have been able to share. In addition, it has set high standards which those competing with it for audiences could not disregard and it has been the training school from which other broadcasters have recruited much of their staff in all categories. For audiences, it has been a strong counter to consumerism.

Implications are serious too, in the case of Radio Australia. There has been a suggestion, for example, that it be put under the Department of Foreign Affairs; an act which could turn an independent broadcaster into a mouthpiece for Australian foreign affairs. Last April the comment was made in the Sydney Morning Herald that, 'For radio Australia to be seen as simply pushing the Australian line

would be disastrous. There are hundreds of millions of people out there, and they're not stupid.'

The notion of a contract, too, if it is meant to be taken seriously, introduces a radical change. The ABC was first a Commission, with Commissioners appointed by the Governor-General and a General Manager appointed by the Commissioners, with a Charter of powers and functions and a flexible management structure. In 1983 it became a Corporation, with much the same charter but with a Board of Directors and Managing Director and a non-flexible management structure. Evans now proposes the ABC become contractor, carrying out certain specified tasks for an agreed payment. This could be a threat to its independence and its ability to broadcast 'without fear or favour', because of the Evans provision that, 'the broadcaster's performance would be judged by its charter'. The ABC is expected to be innovative, but, the Evans charter programs are so narrowly specified that a genuine innovation could mean a program which did not fit the specifications, and this might be judged as a breach of the contract.

### The reasons for change

There are claims that many of the ABC's services are superfluous and a waste of public funds because many of them are now supplied by the SBS and some commercial broadcasters. It is also claimed that the ABC is no longer the only national broadcaster, because the SBS is also national and some of the commercials are broadcasting nationally too. These things make it necessary to determine the special, 'essential' role of the ABC which its present Charter fails to specify. If the exact types of programs it was responsible for, were to be strictly defined so as to allow only one interpretation, then they would constitute and limit its essential and enforceable duties, and the strictness of definition would also facilitate forward-funding estimates and ensure the ABC's independence.

The Evans argument contains many weaknesses. The argument that SBS and some commercials are also national equivocates 'national' as belonging to the nation and as broadcasting nationwide. Although the SBS and some commercials have similar programs to the ABC, the SBS has a narrow reach and the quality of commercial programs is weakened by cuts for advertisements. The argument in the Review of National Broadcasting Policy for a complementary role uses a misquotation of a statement by the Australian Broadcasting Commission in the 1976 Green Report. The statement reads:

*The National Service should take due account of the special needs of people*

*living in rural areas. It should also contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Australian identity. The Commission interprets this emphasis of its national responsibilities as requiring it to operate stations serving particular community needs not fulfilled by other types of stations...*

This is a misquote where the vague 'needs' is substituted for the specific expression, 'particular community needs'. The resulting phrase, 'satisfying needs not met by other broadcasters', is explained like this in Evans' Review:

*In a metropolitan environment, the ABC would be under some obligation to provide programming of a kind not offered by the mainstream commercial network channels and stations; whereas in a regional, rural or remote environment where there is not yet a comprehensive spread of commercial broadcasting, the ABC's programming responsibilities would be correspondingly broader.*

*It is hard to imagine a valid argument for something with such potentially harmful consequences as the reduction of the national broadcaster to a merely complementary role.*

## New look Bulletin

This is the first edition of what is intended will be a more regular, informative and responsive Bulletin to the needs and interests of CAMLA members.

I would appreciate contributions from members in the form of letters, feature articles, extracts, case notes etc.

Before putting fingers to word processors, why not ring me regarding editorial requirements on: 02 950 4381 during business hours. Editorial submissions should be posted to:

The Editor  
Communications Law Bulletin  
4 Tulp St Chatswood 2067