

## Appendix B. ABC's Importance to Australian Life The ABC Charter

### ABC's Importance to Australian Life

- In modern times media plays a significant role in almost all aspects of our lives. Australia's high concentration of media ownership makes strong independent public broadcasting imperative for Australian culture and democracy.

The ABC and SBS play unique and important roles in Australian life. Independent in spirit and at law, the ABC is uncompromised by commercial or political influence and is able to report without fear or favour. It serves the public interest, scrutinising governments and other powerful bodies, including the media itself.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike commercial broadcasters, the ABC regards its audience as citizens, not consumers. The ABC's Charter requires it: to provide innovative and comprehensive services which contribute to a sense of national identity, inform, educate, entertain and reflect Australian cultural diversity; to promote the arts; and to broadcast to other countries programs that will encourage awareness and understanding of Australia.

- The ABC is a service to all Australians, accessible without direct cost. Its significance grows when access to other forms of information, education or quality entertainment are limited by cost, geographical location, disability or other factors. (The present accessibility of current news on commercial websites is not guaranteed for the future. Those outlets are presently resourced by journalism from other platforms and with the decline in newspapers, their owners are earnestly searching for ways to fund them in addition to the advertising they carry.
- The ABC is part of the glue that binds this country together. A national broadcaster - one that all Australians know to tune to in times of emergencies and one which has the trust of the nation is important to our future. It cannot be suddenly resurrected in times of need if it is eroded and loses its pre-eminent position in Australian life. Its importance will only become greater, as digital media technology fragments audiences and different groups in the community grow to have less in common.
- Public broadcasting provides Australian consumers of media with quality and real choices in broadcast and mainstream local online content, which is further enhanced by the ABC's range of network services. Unlike commercial broadcasters, ABC content is not determined by the need to sell advertising space, which results in the selection and development of programming to attract large audiences relevant to specific advertisers.

Content on Australia's free-to-air commercial television broadcasters is essentially the same. While the specific commercial outlet through which major sports events can be viewed may change from time to time, commercial television networks frequently screen the same types of programs. Any differences in the nature or quality of their programs is largely imperceptible.

- The ABC provides audiences with advertisement-free listening, viewing and online use. Many in the community regard this as essential. Citizens should be entitled to access information and entertainment without the promotion of commercial products being forced upon them.
- Public broadcasters set standards for other broadcasters. McKinsey & Co found that public service broadcasters can and do act as regulators of the television industry as a whole, providing the public broadcaster is in a position of strength in terms of its audience share. In the words of Michael Grade, former managing director of Channel 4 in the UK, "The BBC keeps us all honest." (*'Public Service Broadcasters Around the World', McKinsey and Co, 1999. A summary of Mc Kinsey's study is contained in the article 'Keeping Baywatch at Bay', The McKinsey Quarterly: 1999 No.4, pp.18-27 at [www.mckinseyquarterly.com](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com)*)
- Commercial television depends on public broadcasting taking risks. Over the years, commercial television has attempted to replicate programming and has screened programs after they have been found to be popular on the ABC.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Cash for Comment' scandal in 1999-2000, where investigations by ABC TV's *Media Watch* program resulted in the Australian Broadcasting Authority inquiring into two prominent radio station personalities who accepted payment for favourable editorial comment.

- In 2005, the Australian Government opened the tender to produce Australia's Asia Pacific television service to Sky News Australia (the Murdoch, Packer, Stokes consortium) and other broadcasters. At the end of the process, the ABC was asked to continue to provide the service. This was recognition that our independent public broadcaster would most appropriately represent Australia and its interests to our neighbours in the Asia Pacific region. The ABC's international broadcasters, Asia Pacific Television and Radio Australia draw on the resources of other parts of the ABC.

### **The ABC Charter**

The functions which Parliament has given to the ABC are set out in the Charter of the Corporation. (Part II, 6 (1), (2), (3) and (4) of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983)

**6 (1) The functions of the Corporation are-**

- a. to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide-
  - i. broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and
  - ii. broadcasting programs of an educational nature;
- b. to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will-
  - i. encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
  - ii. enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
- c. to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.

**6 (2) In the provision by the Corporation of its broadcasting services within Australia-**

- a. the Corporation shall take account of-
  - i. the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and community sectors of the Australian broadcasting system;
  - ii. the standards from time to time determined by the Australian Broadcasting Authority in respect of broadcasting services;
  - iii. the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs;
  - iv. the multicultural character of the Australian community; and
  - v. in connection with the provision of broadcasting programs of an educational nature - the responsibilities of the States in relation to education; and
- b. the Corporation shall take all such measures, being measures consistent with the obligations of the Corporation under paragraph (a), as, in the opinion of the Board, will be conducive to the full development by the Corporation of suitable broadcasting programs.

**6 (3) The functions of the Corporation under sub-section (1) and the duties imposed on the Corporation under sub-section (2) constitute the Charter of the Corporation.**

**6 (4) Nothing in this section shall be taken to impose on the Corporation a duty that is enforceable by proceedings in a court.**