

Mansfield Recommendations: a step toward the end of the ABC as we know it

The Australian public are to be congratulated. Nobody, but nobody, could have ignored the overwhelming support expressed by Australians right across the country for their ABC. The loud and passionate public debate and 10,615 submissions received by Mr. Bob Mansfield resulted in his acknowledging the unique importance of the ABC to the social fabric of the nation and the development of a distinctive Australian cultural, political and social life. He recommends that the ABC remain a comprehensive broadcaster, free from advertising or sponsorship, and that triennial funding be restored.

Meanwhile, Mr. Mansfield's enthusiasm for the ABC has not prevented him from recommending some damaging changes which will reduce the range, depth and creativity of the national broadcaster.

He makes no recommendations to reverse the proposed Government funding cuts (\$11 million in 1996/97 and \$55 million in 1997/98). He believes the ABC could provide services on a budget of \$500 million, though he offers no evidence to support this proposition.

Mr. Mansfield recommends a strengthening of regional services, and services for youth and children but proposes no increase in ABC funding to deliver these services. Instead, he suggests they be funded by selling ABC property and cutting other services. He makes general comments about the need for further management restructure but cannot say that it will deliver the level of savings required by these budget cuts.

Regional broadcasting relies heavily on the support and back-up of other parts of the ABC. It will flourish only by maintaining the ABC as a whole. Are references to *regional* and *rural* simply hollow words to help the National Party placate their constituents?

Key Damaging Recommendations

Rewrite the ABC Charter

Any redrafting of the legislation and the Charter which governs the ABC opens up a Pandora's box of possibilities. There is significant risk in proposing that a Government which is intent on curtailing and controlling the ABC, rewrite its Charter.

A charter needs to be a broad and encompassing statement, and so far the ABC Charter has worked well. It has not prevented the ABC developing areas which Mr. Mansfield wants specified in the Charter. For example, without specific reference to youth in the Charter, it allowed the creation of the popular youth radio network, Triple J.

The danger in a charter which is too specific is that crucial items inevitably get left off the list. The version of the Charter suggested by Mr. Mansfield eliminates concepts of innovation, the arts, cultural enrichment, education, specialised broadcasting, comprehensiveness (apart from news and current affairs), high standards, international broadcasting and national identity.

Abolish Radio Australia

Provision of a genuinely independent broadcasting service is an important contribution of Australia to Asia and the Pacific. It promotes understanding of Australia, which impacts on commerce and trade in our region. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade told the Review that RA plays a significant role in advancing Australia's diplomatic and trade objectives. Radio Australia is also depended on by Australians abroad.

Mr. Mansfield's information about RA is incomplete. The audience for shortwave frequency is high. As well, RA transmits via satellite, cable and internet (averaging 150,000 'hits' a month), and has re-broadcast arrangements in some areas.

RA's proportion of the ABC budget is only 4%.

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Separate orchestras from the ABC

The establishment of a separate structure had already been announced by the ABC. There are no savings for the ABC in the new arrangement. The orchestras will retain their funding allocation.

Outsource TV Production - Except for news and current affairs, the ABC should get out of television production to the maximum degree possible.

The axing of staff and closure and sale of ABC television studios will leave the ABC with only a minuscule creative TV production base. This partial privatisation of the ABC would result in its becoming a customer for what the commercial sector has to offer. We have already seen that the demands of commercial production lead to programs which are generally of lesser quality, are more homogenised and internationalised. Programs which probe, parody and reflect the diversity of Australian life would be even fewer.

Mr. Mansfield makes this recommendation to dispose of creative talent and resources of the ABC, even though he acknowledges that he is unable to establish if it would be cheaper for the ABC to buy programs from the private sector, rather than to make them in-house. He states, "I have not been able to obtain a reliable comparison of the production costs of the ABC and the independent production sector because of the different methods used and their lack of transparency".

This recommendation is not compatible with Mr. Mansfield's emphasis on strengthening regional broadcasting. The independent production sector is concentrated in NSW and Victoria—with 58% of all employment in NSW.

Sell Real Estate - The ABC should sell off some of its real estate and retain the proceeds to speed up the necessary process of converting to digital technology.

This recommendation goes hand in hand with the moves to privatise TV production. It is a shortsighted and uneconomic proposal. You can only sell off the family farm once.

The ABC as we know it is in danger

Mr. Mansfield's report shows a limited appreciation of the integrated nature of ABC services. His recommendations would result in further reduction of ABC activities and a substantial loss of creative staff.

Even if the ABC were to implement the recommendations to cut, sell and contract out, there is no guarantee that the Government would allow the ABC to retain any of the savings.

Leaked Cabinet documents (The Age 23.1.97) show the Government was well aware that funding cuts to the ABC 'are inconsistent with Government election commitments to maintain ABC funding levels'. The Government planned to use the Mansfield Review as a smokescreen to justify massive cuts to the ABC. In Senator Alston's words, this would "give [the Government] the ability to influence future ABC functions and activities more directly".

Friends of the ABC and supporters have already had a significant impact. Now we must continue to pressure the Government to keep its unequivocal pre-election promise to the Australian people to maintain and strengthen the ABC.