



Community & Public Sector Union

Michael Tull • National President

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

Please find attached a submission from the Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group) to the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Michael Tull', written in a cursive style.

Michael Tull
CPSU National President

CPSU Submission to the inquiry into the ABC's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

Introduction

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is an active and progressive union with approximately 60,000 members. The CPSU represents employees in Commonwealth government employment including the Australian Public Service (APS), the ACT Public Service, the Northern Territory Public Service, CSIRO, the telecommunications sector, call centres, employment services and broadcasting. The CPSU is one of the principal unions representing ABC staff.

Over recent years the CPSU has been campaigning against moves by the ABC to scale back its regional presence, and is currently undergoing consultation with the ABC in relation to plans to shut down local production in Hobart.

The CPSU fully supports the editorial independence of the ABC. However, the ABC is a publicly funded institution and must be accountable for how they spend public money and meet the ABC Charter.

The CPSU believes this Inquiry can make an important contribution to the debate over regional production and programming.

Context of the CPSU submission

The CPSU recently made a submission on ABC Triennial Funding. That submission argues that the ABC requires an increased level of funding in order to respond effectively to the challenges of media convergence. A copy of this CPSU submission is attached.

The CPSU made an extensive submission to the 2011 Inquiry into Recent ABC Programming Decisions (2011 Inquiry). That submission (and indeed the Report of the Committee) are still of relevance to this Inquiry. A copy of this CPSU submission is attached.

Summary

The ABC has an obligation to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia:

- The ABC Charter requires the ABC to provide programs which 'contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community.'
- Meeting the Charter obligations to national identity and cultural diversity requires the ABC to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia.

Regional program production is essential to meeting Charter obligations:

- In its report on the 2011 Inquiry into Recent ABC Programming Decisions (2011 Inquiry) , this committee noted that ‘the core way of achieving programming which reflects cultural diversity is to broadcast programs which represent regional issues and subject matters’
- To do this the ABC must have the capacity to:
 - Be relevant to regional communities by telling local stories with local voices.
 - Create a greater understanding of local and regional issues through local stories which are broadcast to wider audiences.

The CPSU believes that the ABC is NOT meeting its Charter obligations to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia for the following reasons:

- ABC funding is being diverted away from regional Australia in Radio and TV
- More ABC work is being centralised in Sydney and Melbourne and workers are not being treated equitably
- Local TV production has been systemically abolished in most states under the leadership of its outgoing head of TV, Kim Dalton
- Regional managers are often excluded from the decision-making about their stations
- ABC management is out of touch with the needs of regional Australia

Recommendations:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A financial audit of regional expenditure over the last two triennia.2. The ABC budget objectives to include clear targets for regional production across all platforms.3. The ABC to substantiate the mixed model for TV production by setting local production quotas for all TV production4. The ABC to undertake extensive community consultation in all regions in 2013/14 to develop a plan to rebuild local TV production including but not limited to news and current affairs on radio and TV.5. The ABC to make publicly available all data reports and surveys they have commissioned in relation to the needs of regional Australia6. The ABC to provide detailed breakdowns local production in TV and radio by genre. This includes numbers of stories and programs, budgets, and where they are produced.

ABC has an obligation to provide regional production and programming

The ABC has a Charter obligation to programs which 'contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community.'¹ Implied in the references to national identity and cultural diversity is an obligation to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia.

ABC management has also acknowledged as much. In its 2006-2009 Triennial Funding Submission the ABC included the following description of its role:

*'In addition to the ABC Act and Charter, long-standing Government and public expectations provide further guidance to the Corporation including... that the ABC should provide both national services and local services that meet the needs of communities, particularly in regional and rural Australia.'*²

Regional program production is essential for the ABC to meet its Charter obligations. In its report on the 2011 Inquiry into Recent ABC Programming Decisions (2011 Inquiry), this committee noted in relation to this obligation that:

*'The core way of achieving programming which reflects cultural diversity is to broadcast programs which represent regional issues and subject matters'*³

There are two aspects to this; the first is local production. The ABC must be relevant to local communities by telling local stories with local voices and have a presence in regional Australia. The following comments by ABC staff are indicative of the way many ABC employees feel in this regard:

'Having local and informed staff instead of metro-staff that can fly regionally is important to understand the local climate and circumstances, know who to contact for stories, and to make sure the ABC is the first to report accurate news.'

'Local knowledge is always going to be more in depth than 'outsourcing'. And sending in outsiders can have a negative effect on the talent within the story.'

The presence of regional production facilities benefits regional economies and also sustains the infrastructure to cover other regional events.

While ABC radio has done a good job of maintaining local production and producing content for local audiences, ABC TV is failing dismally in this regard in all cities other than Sydney and Melbourne.

¹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, s 6

² ABC Triennial Funding Submission 2006-2009

³ Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, *Report - Recent ABC programming decisions*, October 2011, p 32

The second aspect required for the ABC to meet its charter obligations is local content. The ABC must create a greater understanding of local and regional issues by broadcasting local stories to wider audiences.

The ABC is failing to meet this second aspect of its commitment to regional Australia across all platforms (TV, radio and online).

ABC funding is being diverted away from regional Australia in radio and television

The rate of technological progress is changing Australians' expectations of the ABC and putting it under enormous financial and cultural pressure. The ABC has been at the forefront of embracing new digital delivery options for content in addition to traditional services and has introduced a 24-hour news channel without any additional funding from the Government.

While it is important that the ABC continues to be a leader and innovator in embracing the converged media environment, the resources required to do this have left little finance available for other programming that reflects cultural and regional diversity. Here are two examples given by ABC employees:

'Although new media services are on the increase all around the country, limited budgets have meant existing resources have been cut to fund the new areas. Also, in many parts of regional and remote Australia internet coverage is still poor so people still rely on ABC radio and television for their news and entertainment.'

'For many years researchers in the factual area have been asked to find locations within an hour of base to cut down on costs. Good stories in regional areas tend not to be done for lack of money in budgets.'

This comment from an ABC local radio employee sums up the feelings of many ABC employees in regional Australia:

'Small local teams in regional stations are doing great things, often performing virtual miracles with few resources to serve local audiences. Continuing loss of resources and the resulting weariness and cynicism will threaten one of the best assets the ABC possesses.'

The ABC Charter has not kept pace with technological change, as this comment from an ABC employee indicates:

'The current ABC Charter was made in a pre-internet/pre-smart phone/pre-tablet age and does not reflect the current media consumption habits. This

means that the costs of multiplatform viewing options are not currently funded through the triennial funding, this needs to change.'

The CPSU submission to the 2011 Inquiry and the final report of that review noted that the funding that the ABC formerly received as part of the National Regional Program Initiative was rolled into base funding in 2009-10. This funding is still required to be directed toward regional and local programming. It was noted in that inquiry that the ABC did not provide any supporting information to verify whether this is still occurring and the ABC has continued to withhold information on its regional expenditure.

More ABC work is being centralised in Sydney and Melbourne and workers are not being treated equitably

ABC TV production, news and senior management roles have been removed from the regions and are being centralised in Sydney and Melbourne. This comment from an ABC employee sums up the feelings of many.

'Every year regional staffing shrinks and Sydney staffing grows. The idea of centralising the organisation at a time when technology allows opportunities to grow in regional areas is short sighted.'

As a result, staff and resources in regional areas receive inferior treatment to those in Sydney and Melbourne. For example, ABC local radio facilities in regional areas desperately need equipment upgrades which those in Melbourne and Sydney have already received.

In addition, proportionally more metropolitan radio staff are on higher bands and classifications than their regional counterparts and regional staff are not given the same training opportunities and exposure to higher profile work because employees from Sydney or Melbourne are often flown in to regional areas to cover big stories rather than using local staff.

'How are regional reporters meant to improve when city reporters are used to report BIG regional stories?'

Regional radio staff and news teams are being stretched as content production for new online and social media obligations have led to a large increase in work. Yet regional stations have small staffing levels that have not increased with the workload.

Several employees said that this is compounded by the lack of staff to backfill staff on leave. The CPSU was told about one regional radio station where, due to the small number of staff and inability for positions to be backfilled, the station closes for 4 weeks over Christmas and local residents receive networked news from Sydney instead of local news.

Local TV production has been systemically abolished in most states under the leadership of Kim Dalton

Television production in the ABC is in need of reform. When Kim Dalton took over as the head of television, he introduced an ideological campaign to outsource all ABC production. This has meant a massive reduction in local production in most states with a centralisation of production in Melbourne and Sydney.

The CPSU believes that the ABC is moving towards closing down all internal television production except for news and current affairs. This trend is demonstrated by the recent announcement of the closure of the arts unit and discontinuation of a range of television programs including *The New Inventors*, *ArtNation* and *The Collectors*. This resulted in the redundancies of a number of ongoing staff. The CPSU believes that the programs are being withdrawn to make space for, and to free up finances to fund, further outsourcing of television production.

These moves come after the axing of many other programs over the last several years including the complete outsourcing of drama and comedy. Only a small number of internally produced programs remain at the ABC.

In the 2011 inquiry this committee has already acknowledged the importance of maintaining local TV production:

*'Despite at times being a more expensive option, the committee is strongly supportive of ongoing regional production and content. The committee believes that such activities contribute to fulfilling the ABC's Charter obligations of providing programs that reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community. For the ABC to maintain a presence in these areas and particularly in BAPH [Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth Hobart]regions, it is important that a critical mass of staff, skills, infrastructure and production is maintained.'*⁴

In consecutive triennial funding submissions, the ABC has sought additional government funding for the construction of studios and production facilities which are then not used or used as hire facilities for the private sector. At the same time, they have borrowed significant amounts of money on which they pay interest to cover the cost of making ABC production staff redundant. Cutting staff and production from regional areas is an inefficient use of regional facilities. Increased local production makes the most efficient use of ABC's current facilities. In addition, it builds up ABC's in-house production capacity which makes future in-house production more efficient, and builds the skills of ABC staff.

⁴ Ibid, p 43

While ABC management talks about a commitment to a mixed model of internal and external ABC content production, the reality is that there are no local content production quotas and no commitment to maintain current internal production levels.

The ABC's managing director Mark Scott, has said that 75% of television content will be internally-produced (excluding Rage and news and current affairs) between 2011 and 2013.⁵ However, the ABC has not stated what this entails, where this content is being produced or whether they are meeting that objective. The CPSU urges the Committee to ask the ABC to declare those statistics in the course of this inquiry.

Commitment to regional content must encompass the arts, drama, music, and sport – all things that the ABC is sacrificing to fund convergence issues and expansion of its news services

Regional managers are often excluded from the decision-making about their stations

Most ABC decision making happens in Sydney. Regional employees and managers do not feel like they have much input into how things are run. This creates a disconnect between decisions that are made at the ABC and the needs and interests of people in regional Australia. This is expressed in comments of many ABC employees.

'I work in a major capital city. It is difficult to advance my career because I do not live in Sydney. Decisions get made that I feel would have been even better had I had an opportunity to be involved. I can only imagine it is worse for my colleagues in regional centres. While living and working in a region is not the only way to ensure we are committed to regional diversity, having those staff involved in decision making and able to develop their careers to senior levels is a crucial factor.'

'If we in our state can't have an input in the decision-making process, then how can people not in our state fully understand what is relevant or not from a programming point of view'

'A centralised ABC does not adequately know what is happening in the rest of the ABC nationwide. Regional managers are at the behest of the centralised system in Sydney, therefore are ill equipped to add to the broader discussion about who they could partner with in their state to make engaging content, or to source human resources for productions.'

⁵ Mark Scott and Kim Dalton, *ABC Television Production Strategy 2011-2013*, December 2011, p 2

ABC management is out of touch with the needs of regional Australia

The concentration of senior management in Sydney and Melbourne means managers fail to adequately consider local staff and communities. This, combined with the centralisation of production in those same cities, has given rise to an increase in Sydney/Melbourne-centric content. The following comments show how many ABC employees in regional Australia feel about this:

'Decisions made outside of my state [Queensland] are often in direct conflict with the reality on the ground.'

'I'm not seeing my place [Perth] reflected in the ABC, nor do I see much about Tassie (for example), or Broome, or far north Qld, or Alice Springs, and what I do see from those places tends to be mediated by someone who doesn't come from there either...'

'A recent online initiative designed around the Sydney Opera House was an indication of the Sydney centric mentality that is pervasive within the organisation. If any other state wanted to pitch a project on that scale which is just as relevant then there would be no chance of it ever being produced'

'The ABC does not seek or allow innovation from the branch I work in. They do not seek or want stories of cultural relevance from staff in my region. They do not want employees to show initiative to want to create new or unique programs for television and online. The opportunities for current and future staff have diminished to a very sad standard that will affect the industry in my region for a long time.'

Conclusion

As the national broadcaster, millions of Australians rely on ABC TV, radio and online services to connect them to the world, inform and entertain them. Australia is a unique and diverse country. We need to connect diverse regions of the country and present their stories to the rest of the nation. This is important to bridge city/country divides, create a shared Australian experience and provide a sense of nationhood. This is one of the key roles of the ABC. As such, it has a Charter obligation which requires it represent and reflect regional diversity in Australia.

Regional production and inclusion of local stories to be broadcast to wider audiences are essential for the ABC to fulfil this obligation. As the ABC becomes Sydney and Melbourne centric it is failing to meet this obligation given that 61% of Australians don't live in Melbourne or Sydney.⁶ People from regional areas spend more time watching free to air

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Demographic Statistics June 2012*, Accessed 18 January 2013

television than people from metropolitan areas.⁷ Yet, Funding is being diverted away from regional Australia and management are growing out of touch with regional Australia.

In addition, aspirational journalists, film-makers and producers in regional Australia face additional challenges to represent their regional area as they are forced to uproot and leave their hometown and family to follow career opportunities in capital cities.

The ABC must start telling more local stories to the nation and rebuild its local TV production in order to provide the service that Australians want and expect from the ABC and to fulfil its charter obligation to regional Australia.

⁷ Screen Australia, *Time spent viewing free-to-air television, 2008–2011*, <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/tvviewingftv.aspx>