



26 February 2016

Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee
Parliament House
Canberra

ABC Rural and Regional Advocacy Bill

Dear Committee

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) are delighted to have this opportunity to make a submission. As an active and progressive union representing ABC workers in regional and rural Australia, the CPSU is committed to providing a strong voice for members in key public policy and political debate.

From the outset, the CPSU actively supports an editorially independent and publicly funded ABC that provides distinctive local and specialist content in news, current affairs, drama, comedy and music. The ABC plays a distinct and critical role in Australia's cultural and political landscape and its work is proudly recognised and staunchly protected by CPSU members.

Digital disruption, coupled with the brutal funding cuts by the Government in 2014, has seriously impacted on the ABC's ability to represent and reflect regional Australia. Overall the CPSU believe that the ABC has done a good job keeping the national broadcaster intact and fulfilling its Charter. However when it comes to regional and rural Australia, the CPSU believes that the ABC can and should be doing more.

Proposed legislation does address the real threats to regional and rural ABC services

The CPSU strongly agrees that the ABC should be doing more to fulfil its Charter obligations to represent and reflect Australians, including better representing regional and rural Australia. However, the CPSU does not support the proposed legislation and believes it would ultimately hinder rather than improve the ABC's ability to fulfil its Charter.

It is the view of CPSU members that the current ABC Charter is fit for purpose and that the problems raised by Senator McKenzie concern the way in which the ABC Executive implements the Charter, not the Charter itself. The CPSU further notes that the ABC Charter should not be used to politically interfere with, or undermine the editorial independence of the ABC. The role and value of public broadcasting should be safeguarded by all political parties and independents, and sit above the reach of Governments of all persuasions.

In the context of regional and rural Australia, the CPSU assert that the ongoing decline in the ABC's real funding, coupled with Coalition's unsustainable cuts to the ABC budget in 2014 present a more

immediate and imminent threat to the programs and services that regional and rural Australians enjoy and rely on. Any serious analysis of the ABC's regional and rural output must be done with consideration to its funding situation if it is to make credible conclusions about what can be done to improve this area.

The CPSU believes that regional and rural Australians are best served by an ABC that has the funding to invest in local content and notes that as part of the current triennial funding negotiations, the ABC is seeking funding specific to regional and rural outputs.ⁱ The CPSU support the ABC's bid for this funding but believes that it should be tied funding to ensure the money remains invested in ABC regional and rural services over time.

Coalition's funding cuts have hurt ABC audiences in regional and rural Australia

In 2014, the Coalition Government forced funding cuts on the ABC amounting to a \$250 million reduction over five years (with a further \$50 million per annum on-going reduction in the ABC budget).ⁱⁱ The Government also terminated the ABC's \$220 million Australia Network contract just one year into its ten year term.ⁱⁱⁱ The final blow to ABC audiences, present and future, was the Government's decision to pocket efficiency savings found by the ABC instead of allowing the ABC to reinvest this money into digital content and services for ABC audiences. The immediate result of these changes has been a reduction in local content and more ABC operations centralised in Sydney. Examples include axing of state based 7.30 Reports and the closure of Adelaide TV production.

Whilst the ABC maintains that ABC Regional was quarantined from the cuts^{iv}, the simple truth is that less money for the ABC means less money for ABC Regional. It could be reasonably argued that if the ABC had been allowed to continue reinvesting its efficiencies back into content and services, ABC Regional would have started this financial year with an increase in budget rather than standing still. It could also be argued that removing important local content like stock reports and local Morning programs *might* have been avoided altogether.

Localism and the ABC Charter

The CPSU believes that the case for *how* local content is best derived has been prosecuted and won many times over by way of government inquiries, cultural experts, advocacy groups, ABC staff and regional audiences themselves.^v 'Local voices' telling local stories' is the sentiment that lies at the heart of the ABC Charter and its reason for existence.

However, ongoing funding pressures faced by the ABC, has resulted in the ABC itself pushing new and unconvincing definitions of localism and how local content is best derived. The CPSU has always refuted these 'definitions' and asserts the ABC's purpose has been to rationalise decisions to move away from localism as well as to stave off criticisms that the ABC is not fulfilling its Charter as effectively as it should be.

Sydney-centrism amongst the ABC Executive is real and problematic

The decisions of a primarily Ultimo-based ABC Executive are problematic when it comes to regional and rural Australia. Managerial functions at the Executive level are carried out with limited understanding of regional operations or needs, and they are generally framed in the context of an internally competitive

resourcing model and the ABC's digital growth. Similar to many large organisations, ABC's managerial fiefdoms and personalities have proven to exert a disproportional influence on the ongoing battles for resources.

The CPSU endeavours to tackle ABC Sydney-centrism where we can, using the industrial levers available to us, as well as through our community campaigning efforts. However, it is important that the Australian community and especially those who advocate for a vibrant and healthy national broadcaster continue to engage the ABC on this issue if genuine cultural change in the ABC Executive is to occur.

As recently as last week, CPSU members had to challenge the ABC Executive on the Sydney-based location of ABC job opportunities for a national radio network. When challenged, the ABC changed their initial assessment and opened up applications to all ABC staff across the country, however, the CPSU is concerned that rather than arriving at this decision because of serious reflection on the ABC's Sydney-centrism, the decision was informed by the timing of our request, which coincided with exiting Managing Director Mark Scott's 'look over there' speech at the National Press Club and this Senate inquiry.

The ABC's creation of a new Regional Division is a step in the right direction

In May 2015, partly in response to growing internal and external criticism of ABC Sydney-centrism, the ABC took the step of creating a new division that would consolidate the ABC's regional and rural resources under a dedicated Director. Although a difficult transition, the CPSU applauds the ABC for taking this action and firmly believe that the new Director role will go a long way towards stronger advocacy for regional and rural ABC at the Executive level.

At the same time, the CPSU notes that in spite of the new Division's ambitious remit, ABC Regional was not allocated any extra funding by the ABC. We also note that the ABC Regional Director's first order of business was to engage in another 'Hunger Games' style process that saw more than 150 years of regional staff experience leaving the ABC over the December/January period.^{vi} An assessment of the ABC's publicity around the creation of the new division reveals little about this loss was communicated to ABC's regional audiences, some of whom still do not realise that their much-loved local presenters no longer work for the ABC.

The ABC's own internal polling shows that ABC regional staff think the ABC is Sydney-centric

The view of the ABC as a Sydney-centric organisation is not just a criticism levelled at the ABC by external stakeholders; it is an impediment that is widely felt by the ABC's regional workforce. In May 2015, the ABC conducted staff workshops across the country to discuss the future of the ABC and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Below is an extract of the ABC's edited summary of what ABC staff said in these workshops^{vii}:

“Regional staff raised concerns about the Corporation being Sydney-centric and that there needs to be greater understanding about the role and importance of the regions to the greater Corporation.

Staff in some regions raised what they perceive as a lack of understanding in some, in the metros about areas outside of the capital city which impacts on the stories being told. Metro staff should

have an understanding of state or territory issues: where the stories/issues are and, importantly, the time it might take to get to this location to tell the story.

Regional staff see an opportunity in giving the regions more editorial control as local staff are the experts on local stories and audiences. This would remove bottlenecks in publishing.”

The sentiments expressed in the ABC’s survey echo the sentiments expressed by CPSU members working in ABC Regional.

Union members in regional ABC have told the CPSU that it is common practice not to backfill regional staff when they take leave, and that the ABC Executive prefers to fly in metropolitan-based crews to cover breaking stories during these absences. As sighted in the feedback above, regional staff feel this can be to the detriment of the story because local staff have in most cases, better local knowledge. Another example is that the ABC does not pay regional staff for being ‘on-call’ during bushfire season or emergencies. On-call payment arrangements are standard in many metropolitan workplaces in the ABC (by way of a direct payment or via buyout provisions).

Although this inquiry is not focused on the ABC’s industrial relations, it is worth noting some of differences in the ABC’s work practices when it comes to regional and metropolitan staff – because they further support the concern that the ABC does not treat its regional arm as equitably as it could be.

The CPSU would like to see more work being done by the ABC to scope out the extent and feasibility of decentralising new ABC work, especially in relation to digital content and services. A brief proposal was put to the ABC earlier this year in response to the Capital City Production Review. The timing of that proposal was not ideal however the CPSU believes that the ABC must develop and foster the digital skills that it needs for the future in all ABC workplaces.

Previous Senate Committee recommendations are directly relevant to this inquiry

The CPSU notes that there have been several Committee inquiries that have delved into the issue of localism and the ABC Charter, and that some of the key recommendations from these Committee reports, if implemented, would go a long way to improving the ABC’s performance in relation to regional and rural Australia, as well as the perception and understanding of the ABC’s performance in relation to regional and rural Australia. Specifically the CPSU notes:

1. Environment and Communications References Committee – ‘Recent ABC Programing Decisions October 2011’

- **Recommendation 7:** The committee recommends that the ABC publish annual targets of regional content on ABC television against which it reports to meet its Charter obligation to ‘reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community’ and to promote ongoing internal program production in the BAPH states and regional Australia’.
- **Recommendation 10:** The committee recommends that as part of the triennial funding round, the government consider the ABCs capacity to maintain a critical mass of staff, skills, infrastructure and production in regional areas.

2. Environment and Communications Reference Committee – The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity March 2013’

- **Recommendation 2:** The committee recommends that the ABC conducts an annual program of consultation with regional stakeholders in the film and television industry so that they gain a mutual understanding of ABC production, planning, priorities and the capacity of regional Australia to produce content; and recommends that the ABC publish the outcomes of this consultation.
- **Recommendation 3:** The committee recommends that the ABC annual publish its regional content production performance for ABC television, including data on the amount invested, number of programs produced, hours of production produced and number of independent companies used.
- **Recommendation 4:** The committee recommend that the ABC establish a regional television production fund for production outside of Sydney and Melbourne. This fund should be available to regional production exclusively and may be used as part of co-funded projects within the region with the aim to stimulate regional independent production.
- **Recommendation 5:** The committee recommend that the ABC make and publish at regular intervals its future financial commitment to investing in production outside of Sydney and Melbourne.

Conclusion – ABC can improve its services to regional and rural Australia but new funding should be tied to ensure the ABC remains focused on the needs of regional and rural Australians over time

The CPSU continues to be concerned about the manner in which the ABC represents and reflects regional and rural Australia. However the CPSU does not support the proposed legislation and does not believe it will satisfactorily address those concerns. Further the CPSU believes the proposed legislation would further hinder the ABC’s ability to fulfil its obligations.

The Coalition’s unsustainable cuts to ABC funding pose the most obvious and imminent threat to regional and rural services. The impact of these cuts and restoration of cut funding must be addressed this triennial funding round, if genuine improvements to ABC’s regional and rural services are to be made.

The ABC must be allowed to reinvest savings that it identifies, back into programs and services for all ABC audiences including those in regional and rural Australia.

The CPSU believes that the ABC can be doing more to fulfil its Charter to regional and rural Australia, and support tied funding for ABC Regional as part of the current triennial funding negotiations. ABC Sydney-centrism is a real and present problem inside the ABC. Tied funding would ensure that regional and rural services remain a key focus of the ABC until such a time that the ABC can demonstrate a significant shift at the Executive level.

The CPSU would urge the Committee to consider adopting some of the recommendations made in previous reports including “Recent ABC Programming Decisions October 2011” and “The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity March 2013”.

For more information please contact CPSU ABC Section Secretary, Sinddy Ealy at sinddy.ealy@cpsu.org.au or (02) 8204 6987.

Yours sincerely,



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ⁱ Mark Scott in ABC Senate Estimates. 9 February 2016. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/a8b2a330-2ff1-4ce6-854d-9ac2571abba4/toc_pdf/Environment%20and%20Communications%20Legislation%20Committee_2016_02_09_4133.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%222010s%202016%2002%2009%20environment%20and%20communications%20legislation%20committee%22

ⁱⁱ ABC submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts. Inquiry into the importance of public and commercial broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia, including the arts, news and other services. February 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ ABC Budget Response. 13 May 2014. <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/abc-budget-response/>

^{iv} ABC submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts – Inquiry into the importance of public and commercial broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia, including the arts, news and other services. February 2016

^v The CPSU assert that the majority of submissions made to the following parliamentary Inquiries reiterate the view that local stories are best told by local voices, including the submissions made by the Community and Public Sector Union. “Towards a digital future 2010”, “Recent ABC programming decisions 2011”, “The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity March 2013”.

^{vi} ABC Workplace Relations email to CPSU confirming staff movements in ABC Regional. 5 February 2016 and 12 February 2016. This information was further corroborated by the CPSU with former ABC Regional employees and CPSU members.

^{vii} ABC Intranet; 20 July 2015. <http://myabc/ABC-2015-Strategy/Strategy-workshops/Strategy-workshops-feedback.aspx>