



# Barr on the ABC

**In Canada and in New Zealand, where public broadcasters derive 33 per cent and 76 per cent of their income respectively from commercial sources, the result has been profound audience dissatisfaction with the increasingly narrow range of service offered by the public broadcasters.**

This was one of the points made by Trevor Barr, Associate Professor in Media and Communications at Swinburne University, keynote speaker at the Friends of the ABC Victorian Branch Annual General meeting on 12 September 1993. The meeting was chaired by the current president, Janet Powell.

In his speech, Barr highlighted the changing nature of the debate about the ABC, which has moved away from suggestions of the ABC's crisis of identity and ungovernability towards broader issues of competition and efficiency. In response to the new challenges facing the ABC, it must articulate its role and ethos as a public service broadcaster, he said.

Barr identified three challenges facing the ABC: fundamental institutional change, fragmentation and compromise, and technologies of abundance. The first refers to suggestions that the ABC should be less dependent on government funding. Barr said that calls for the ABC to derive its income from sources other than the government represent an attack on the public ideology and values of the ABC.

Barr argued that there is a significant public interest argument in favour of maintaining substantial government funding and the editorial autonomy and integrity of the ABC.

Fragmentation and compromise, in the sense of offering more select 'niche' broadcasting, is one possible response to decreased funding open to the ABC. Yet this would be contrary to the obligation in the ABC Charter to offer a comprehensive service and would compromise the ABC's role as an innovative broadcaster.

The third challenge to the ABC is posed by the new forms of technology and delivery modes available to broadcasters, the most topical of which currently is pay TV. Barr said that any venture into pay TV is unlikely to be profitable in early years and that the number of Australians with the discretionary income to afford the cost of pay TV is decreasing. He suggested that the ABC should be cautious in its entry into pay TV and should adopt a limited role as a provider of programs rather than as a systems operator. The ABC could make innovative use of pay TV to provide a formal education program along the lines of the Open University program, which could be combined with multimedia technology.

Barr suggested that in response to these challenges, the ABC must articulate its role and ethos as a public service broadcaster, and that there are four areas in which it can fulfil vital needs. Firstly, the ABC must address the public in all its diversity and act as a force for social cohesion in Australian society. Barr observed that the existence of a large number of channels does not necessarily equate with diversity and compared the experience in England which has four channels and much diversity with that in America, which has many channels and little diversity. Diversity also has geographic connotations. The ABC plays a vital role in providing quality information and entertainment to people in rural areas.

Secondly, the ABC must set the example with quality programming. Barr cited two areas which call for innovative broadcasting: extending Australian notions of Asia beyond crude notions of a potential market in order to foster greater cultural understanding; and recognising the increasing fragmentation and polarisation of Australian society.

Thirdly, the ABC must speak for and with minorities, particularly in the face of the development of an underclass and substantial social displacement in Australian society. Barr

contrasted the reporting of major social issues by the ABC and the commercial media. For example some elements of the commercial media have discussed the Mabo decision in the context of threats to backyards, whereas commentators on the ABC have adopted a much more informed, thoughtful and considered approach.

The final areas highlighted by Barr were self-criticism and audience access. Stuart Littlemore's recent scathing attack, in his *Media Watch* program, on *Four Corners* is an example of the sort of intellectual honesty and capacity for self-criticism of which the ABC is capable. Commercial broadcasting does not engage in such self-criticism. Barr acknowledged that the question of access is a complex one, but the essence of his argument is that the ABC must not be perceived as the province of a few professional broadcasters and both the ABC and the commercial media must offer greater access to different sub-cultures.

Barr concluded his speech by arguing that there is still a vital role for public broadcasting, and suggested that the argument about the future directions for the ABC should move into the realm of the debate about democratic rights. The right to a free and adequately funded public broadcaster must be non-negotiable. However, it is a right for which we may have to fight in future, in which case, organisations such as Friends of the ABC will act as the catalyst for protest.

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