



## CU Comment

# Has the ABC lost the Plot?

**(Great broadcasting) makes sense, justifies itself as compared with other possible systems, only if it articulates and symbolises the wider moral and intellectual - not material - ambitions of the society in which it happens to be. National broadcasting systems should properly represent a rational and moral optimism within a society; should suggest that we can be better than we are - better served, better amused, better informed.**

Professor Michael Tracey, address to a conference on Australia's National Broadcasters in the 1990s, June 1990.

**It's ABC funding time again and earlier this month the ABC submitted its proposal for triennial funding (up to 1996-97) to Government.**

The ABC is seeking continued real funding levels over the three years with an additional total of \$28 million phased in over four years.

CU has no argument with adequate funding for the ABC, nor with providing the Corporation with additional funds, provided that the organisation can demonstrate that it has its priorities right.

Judgements about the ABC's performance in its primary role, as a program provider, are best left to its audience. What is important is that the Corporation itself should be clear about that role and about where it sits in relation to other sectors of broadcasting, including planned new services. Regrettably, its recent forays into areas like advertiser-supported international television and pay television, its eagerness to exploit every possible commercial opportunity, and the market rhetoric and techno-speak it uses to support these ventures often make it indistinguishable from its commercial counterparts.

Meanwhile, it is obvious that a new wind is blowing through the corridors of Canberra, generated by a Prime Minister who appears genuinely committed to Australia's cultural development, and an Arts Minister (Bob McMullan) with a strong voice in Cabinet. The wind seems to have permeated even to the Department of Communications (see lead story).

There is at long last a recognition that the deregulation of broadcasting, with the emphasis on minimal program regulation, multiple services and the full play of market forces, may have some unexpected and undesirable outcomes. This realisation may have come too late for some players, like the commercial networks, but it is a development which the ABC should exploit to the hilt. As Phillip Adams recently wrote, the role of the ABC as 'a village explainer, a source of information that a nation needs if it is to function' will become increasingly important amid a multiplicity of radio and television services.

Around the world, in countries comparable with Australia, people are reasserting the fundamental cultural importance of national broadcasting. As noted in last month's CU, a 1992 report of the Standing Committee on

Communications and Culture affirmed the cultural role of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and recommended a 'stable and predictable' funding program for the national broadcaster. The CBC itself put an eloquent case to this committee built on the primacy of its cultural significance in Canadian life.

Over the last decade, the strategy increasingly adopted by the ABC has been described by Michael Tracey as 'to respond to all the technocratic catchwords and practices of the modern era by adopting them'.

*The consequence of this process in some people's minds has too frequently been to incarnate the mundane and the middlebrow as the measure of achievement, to cut back on the creative, the innovative and....anything that might be felt to be contentious.*

Two recent industry gatherings provided a demonstration of the kind of rhetoric to which the ABC is obstinately clinging. At the CMTLP seminar in Melbourne and the 1993 Broadcasting Summit in Sydney, Managing Director David Hill and Strategic Development Director Rosemary Sinclair respectively gave similar versions of the now-classic ABC conference paper, a presentation which sounds suspiciously like a compressed version of the Annual Report.

Typically, such a paper quotes from the ABC's charter, trots out some platitudes about its importance, lists its 'achievements' and leans heavily on statistics (prizes won, ratings achieved, merchandise sold, export successes). Regrettably, this shopping-list approach also characterised an ABC submission on the 1992 paper on the role of the Commonwealth in Australia's cultural development. The ABC paper took a narrow, 'arts'-focussed view of culture and is characterised mainly by its superficiality.

Reports of squabbles among the men who fill the top management jobs in the ABC conceal a much deeper malaise. The lack of intellectual depth or truly strategic thinking at the upper levels of the ABC, where the proponents of exploiting new technologies are king, was exacerbated by the departure to SBS of Malcolm Long, an expe-

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rienced broadcaster with a history of thoughtful contributions to a philosophy of national broadcasting. In what could well be a sign of future directions, to fill the gap left by Long the Corporation has appointed its former director of corporate services, a man with a background of finance and Auditor General's Department.

It is interesting to speculate where the ABC Board sits in all this. Have they too become captives of technological whizzbangery and commercial imperatives, wedded to the idea that ratings and overseas program sales are still what national broadcasting in the 1990s is all about?

It is now over a decade since the first ever comprehensive review of the ABC. In the policy vacuum which prevailed at the then Australian Broadcasting Commission, it was left to that Committee of Review to articulate a philosophy of national broadcasting and to develop objectives which would translate into legislation.

The ensuing decade has seen the beginning of a revolution in the Australian broadcasting system which will take full effect in the next few years. If ever there was a moment for the ABC to reassert its role and relevance in Australian society, it is now.

This is not to suggest a return to world of the Argonauts and *Blue Hills*, based on a nostalgia for the ABC of the distant past, as some of its misguided friends seem to advocate. But instead of concentrating on commercial exercises and partnerships of dubious value and which may present a significant threat to its traditional responsibilities, the ABC Board should grasp the opportunity to state a philosophy of national broadcasting for the start of the second millennium.

A major function of the ABC under its charter is to provide innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard. The charter contains a number of objectives related to this, such as contributing to national identity and cultural diversity. These are broad rather than restrictive, and are open to new or different interpretations to suit changing social and cultural conditions.

In a new environment of multiplying services and fragmenting audiences, the ABC needs to articulate a reflective, intellectually challenging view of the place of the broadcaster, its cultural value and the importance of its national voice. It should look beyond its own resources, and consult its audiences about its role in their lives, now and in the future. It should pick the brains of Australia's best thinkers. It should apply intellectual rigour to the process of developing a philosophy. And having done so, it should promote and disseminate this philosophy so that it is clear not only to Canberra but to all Australians.

If the ABC is unable to do this on its own, perhaps another comprehensive review is needed. □

## New Peak Body for Broadcasting

**The Broadcasting Industry Advisory Council (BIAC), which met for the first time in August, has replaced the former Broadcasting Council, a body which had outlived its usefulness.**

The Broadcasting Council had increasingly focussed on fairly low level technical and similar issues, and there was a perception that it had become a lobbying forum and a captive of industry interest groups.

The new council is chaired by the Minister (David Beddall), and membership is by invitation from the Minister. It is established under s.216 of the BSA entitling the Minister to establish advisory and consultative bodies.

There has clearly been an effort to upgrade membership and focus the body on high level policy issues. Where chief executives represented their organisations on the earlier council, that role is now filled by the highest level person, usually the chair. Thus Mark Armstrong and Nick Shehadie rather than David Hill and Malcolm Long represent the ABC and the SBS respectively, and Bruce Gyngell in his capacity as FACTS chairman, rather than Tony Branigan, represents commercial television.

Community broadcasting is represented by the CBAA (still afloat but battling after financial problems outlined in *CU* 92). The membership of the BIAC will be expanded as new areas such as narrowcasting and satellite pay TV become operational and establish peak bodies.

The DTC's Chris North told *CU* that the objective was that the BIAC should provide a sounding board for the Minister. The kind of issues it is likely to tackle include 'transport of broadcasting' (ie satellite coverage extending across many countries, and unwanted incursions by satellites); the problem of continued support for Australian content in 'an era of plenty'; the implications of digital technology; convergence, global communications and vertical integration.

There will be no rigid agenda and the aim is to have the agenda set by the group, though unless there is active participation the Minister may be obliged to set agendas to ensure that the key issues are covered.

*CU* understands that the ACTU was approached to represent a 'user' viewpoint, though it seems that President Martin Ferguson was not prepared to accept this responsibility - which anyway would appear to be more appropriately offered to a consumer or public interest organisation, perhaps in consultation with Consumer Affairs Minister Jeannette McHugh.