



ABC Committee Weighs in to Funding Battle

In an unusual move, the ABC National Advisory Council issued a statement (26 February) expressing its concern at the possibility of further cuts to the ABC's funding as outlined in the Coalition's Fightback! and the implications for the Corporation's services.

'The NAC believes that further funding cuts would not only reduce the quality, but would mean a significant reduction on the range of service (*sic*) it would provide', the Committee's statement said. 'The contribution that the ABC makes to Australian life and Australian culture throughout the continent is essential to the continued development of the Australian nation'.

This normally rather low-profile body is the sole remnant of an advisory structure which once included State-based committees as well. Comprising 12 members and a convenor representing each State and territory, it is supposed to act as a filter of community views to the ABC Board. Not since the early seventies has an ABC advisory committee spoken so publicly on an issue, and it is a measure of the concern - not to say all-out panic - which prevailed in the ABC in the lead-up the election.

David Hill's warnings on the dire consequences of the Coalition's proposed \$50m cut for the Corporation led the

then Opposition communications spokesman Warwick Smith to retort that the ABC should not comment on matters of policy during an election campaign.

An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (9 March) pointed out that the ABC would be on stronger ground defending itself if the Labor Government had not 'politicised' it by appointing to the board a number of people with close Labor ties.

The latest of these appointments, which passed without even a statement from the Minister, was of one Len Hingley, a member of the ACTU executive and federal secretary of the Finance Sector Union.

Hingley joins another unionist, Janine Walker, who was appointed at the same time as the former ALP pollster and longtime eminence grise to the party, Rod Cameron.

Hill himself is generally perceived as having Labor connections, though relations between him and the Hawke and Keating Governments have hardly been cosy given Hill's spirited defence of ABC independence and his regular calls for adequate funding.

Some of the biggest sighs of relief around Australia after 13 March must have been heard around the ABC's highrise Ultimo headquarters. □

'Drop Through' - What Is It?

A new phrase - 'drop through' - has entered the lexicon of broadcasting jargon.

ABA member Tim O'Keefe dropped 'drop through' in his speech to a Sydney radio conference and some participants looked bemused. It has also arisen recently in the context of the ABA's award of one-year licences to community TV to use the vacant sixth high power channel.

The expression describes the process set out in s.34 of the Broadcasting Services Act, which covers alternative uses of broadcasting bands. Under this section, the ABA can allocate part of the radiofrequency spectrum for a specified period, in circumstances where, for various reasons, that part of the spectrum has not been taken up by, or made available for, commercial television or radio - for example, if the ABA has not begun or completed planning and allocation processes for it.

While it must keep in mind possible future demand for the specific part of the spectrum, the ABA can allocate the spectrum for a variety of purposes, including:

- the temporary transmission or re-transmission of programs;
- use by providers of subscription broadcasting/narrowcasting services or open narrowcasters.

The process through which community television must go in order to use the sixth channel was described in a PBAA backgrounder as follows:

The ABA will:

- make the channel available for use in a particular licence area: that is, 'drop through' the channel in that area;
- wait a couple of weeks to see who applies to use the channel, and assess the applications to ensure consistency with community and educational non-profit purposes;
- issue a radiocommunications (transmitter) licence to the successful applicant. □