

Communications

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CU Comment

The ABC In Crisis

It is no exaggeration to say that the ABC has reached a crisis point in its 62-year history.

Nothing could have demonstrated this more sharply than the downgrading of the national broadcaster in the Prime Minister's recent cultural policy statement. Here was an opportunity for the Government to affirm the ABC's central role in our cultural life, in its reach and influence arguably our single most important cultural institution; an opportunity to sweep away the funding uncertainties of recent years and set the ABC on a firm financial footing.

But in his speech launching the statement, the Prime Minister made no direct reference to the ABC. The only allusion to it was a negative one - the proposal to remove from its control the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The SBS, by contrast, was rewarded with its long-awaited additional funds for local production. The section on the ABC in the document itself is bland and platitudinous. No vision or excitement here; only an acknowledgment that 'one of the features that makes our national broadcasters so valuable is that their editorial and programming independence is guaranteed through legislation'.

However valid their independence in program areas may be, by any yardstick the orchestra proposal represents an extraordinary assault on the independence of the ABC board to set policy for the broadcaster. Whether one agrees that the orchestras should be separated from the ABC or not - and two major inquiries during the 80s recommended divestment - what is significant is that scarcely a voice was raised against the way the Government simply directed the ABC to start offloading the State-based orchestras (for the Prime Minister said that the 'way is open.... for the others to follow if they wish'). The ABC's own carefully-worded media release on the proposal seemed intended to be as inoffensive as possible, saying merely that the ABC 'would be concerned' at divestment.

Hard on the heels of this assault came the resignation of Managing Director David Hill, which many commentators saw as an acknowledgment of his alleged personal unpopularity in Canberra, particularly with the Prime Minister and the Minister for Arts and Communications, Michael Lee. This is too simplistic an explanation. It might be fairer to see Hill - while acknowledging his abrasiveness and sometimes unattractive style of operating - as merely a scapegoat for a deterioration in ABC-Canberra relations, now at a nadir rarely equalled in ABC history, which should more accurately be laid at the door of the board.

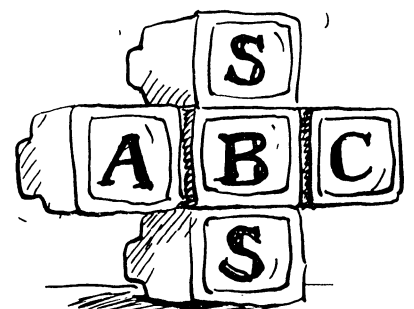
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Over the last few years, a majority of the board has often appeared little more than a rubber stamp for Hill and television management, or a ready complier with almost any edict issued from Canberra. Seduced by Hill's gung-ho enthusiasm for new technology, and by carrots offered by Canberra in the form of one-off allocations, this majority has endorsed such proposals as involving the ABC as a full service provider in pay TV with little apparent soul-searching about the likely effect of this on its free to air services; and establishing the overseas service Australia TV with - at the Government's behest - sponsorship support, a move that struck at the heart of their own longstanding opposition to any form of commercial sponsorship on the ABC.

These developments might have been entirely acceptable had they been part of a carefully thought out position for the ABC in a rapidly changing broadcasting environment. The board should long ago have developed a statement of its vision for the ABC over the next decade and opened it up for public debate and discussion. It could then have gone to Canberra, and, with a firm idea about the direction of the national broadcaster, argued cogently for or against moves like ABC pay TV and Australia TV. The process of developing a cultural policy offered the ABC an ideal opportunity to articulate a philosophy placing it at the centre of Australian cultural life, but it was an opportunity the Corporation failed to grasp.

History shows that ABC boards, while composed of people appointed by governments, almost inevitably fall foul of those same governments. By and large, this has been for the right reason - fiercely defending the national broadcaster's independence. It is to David Hill's credit that he never failed to do this, however unpopular it made him. The impression of the current board is that it has low standing in Canberra and that this is due to a lack of direction being given by the board to management and an almost total failure to articulate and 'sell' a viable concept of national broadcast-

ing in Australia when threatened with economic cutbacks and assaults on its independence. The Prime Minister is known to relish a stoush when he respects his opponents. Perhaps in future the Government will take more care over its choice of ABC board members. The ABC deserves, at the top, a combination of cultural and intellectual credentials, corporate acumen, and an unswerving commitment to the notion of independent public broadcasting.

The Hill Succession

Media speculation about Hill's successor has carried the clear implication that the Government, not the board, will be making the choice. In fact, the Government has no statutory role in selecting the Managing Director. Under the ABC Act, the appointment is made by the board. Suggestions in the media that front runners are such Government favourites as Anne Summers, former advisor to Keating, and Brian Johns, chair of the ABA, can be taken to mean that the media, at least, believe that the Government will be telling the board whom it wants. Just as it (so the story goes) let the board know whom it did not want any longer - Hill.

When Hill (then Chairman) was appointed in the wake of Geoffrey Whitehead, it was widely believed that he was the Government's choice. As a former advisor to NSW Premier Neville Wran, he certainly had impeccable ALP connections. That the then board allowed this impression widespread currency was the first step on a path which has led to the current dismal situation.

It is cause for concern that the ABC staff and their union have failed to stand up to defend the organisation's independence, or even effectively to question or oppose board moves which pose a threat to existing services. Years of voluntary and involuntary redundancies which have seen the departure of some of the most committed and active staff, along with the advent of contract employment, continued tight funding, and fears based on Coalition statements at the last election

that an alternative Government would spell the final death knell for the ABC, have reduced the once-vocal staff to virtual silence.

The recent Palmer inquiry into whether ABC program sponsorship rules attracted practices which undermined the ABC's editorial independence served only to highlight what any reasonably perceptive ABC TV viewer already knew: that Government imposed funding stringencies could lead to program funding arrangements of a kind totally inimical to the broadcaster's traditional independence and impartiality.

The terms of reference of the Senate Select Committee inquiring into the ABC are inadequate and superficial, patched together out of a mish-mash of recent ABC controversies and issues. This inquiry will merely allow an opportunity for a few politicians to grandstand, and will waste a great deal of ABC staff and management time.

Regrettably, the current piecemeal approach to reviewing national broadcasting will achieve nothing in terms of setting the ABC on the right track for the 21st century.

Asked on *Media Watch* (7 November) about recent problems at the ABC, Minister Michael Lee replied:

(The ABC) has also done a lot of good things too. I get a bit defensive of the ABC. Its critics don't hesitate to come forward and give the ABC that we all love a bit of a kick. That's probably because a lot of people believe the ABC plays a very important part in broadcasting in Australia, and that's certainly my view.

The Minister seems genuinely to care about the ABC, and his emphasis on content ahead of technology is a good sign, especially in an ABC context. He told *Media Watch* that his success in the portfolio would probably be judged by how he handled the issue of pay TV. If he had had more time to ponder this question, he might have answered that he would like to be remembered as the Minister who restored the ABC to its rightful role in Australia's cultural life. The opportunity is certainly there, and everyone who cares about the ABC should hope that he grasps it. □