



The ABC: from Evans to Alston

The September issue of **CU** examined the influential *Dix Report*, which effected revolutionary change to the ABC's organisational and management structure. In this issue, **CU** examines the 1988 Evans Discussion Paper and the 1994 Alston Inquiry.

The Evans Discussion Paper

The Department of Transport and Communications' 1988 *Review of National Broadcasting Policy* was released with the stated intention of promoting general debate about the role and objectives of the ABC.

Its key document, *Policy Discussion Paper No. 1* (the Paper) advocated a new legislative definition of the ABC's objectives in the form of a revised Charter. The then Minister for Communications, Senator Gareth Evans, argued that the existing Charter - which he described as 'a mixture of high sounding rhetoric and generalised directives' - ill-equipped the ABC to deal with issues confronting it. These issues included whether the ABC should provide a 'comprehensive' service or one merely 'complementary' to that of the commercial stations, the proper balance to be struck between program ratings and quality, between innovative services and those of proven worth, and between the fostering of national and regional or community identities.

The Paper proposed that the role of the national broadcaster should be to promote 'quality, diversity and national identity'. A new Charter could require the ABC to:

- provide authoritative information (national and international);
- provide cultural enrichment;
- contribute to a sense of national identity; and
- complement commercial services to the extent necessary to ensure that comprehensive programming

is available to all Australians.

These objectives, relating to the content of broadcasting services, would be supplemented by more qualitative objectives, namely that the services:

- be of high quality;
- be thoroughly professional; and
- maximise the use of Australian origin material.

Program priorities

Following this, the Paper sought to categorise programs into 'Charter', 'non-Charter' and peripheral activities. As a guide, the Paper compiled a table of the various characters programs categories could fall within (see table).

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The Paper envisaged the Charter as a statement of objectives essential to, and descriptive of, the broadcaster's main purpose. The ABC could also properly pursue 'non-Charter' objectives consistent with, but not essential to, its main purpose. Also, the ABC - for historical, administrative or other reasons - had 'peripheral' objectives which, though valuable in themselves,

bore no direct or immediate relationship to the ABC's main purpose.

Responsibilities flowing from each category would fall within separate funding schemes. Charter responsibilities would be funded primarily from Budget appropriations within the context of agreed multi-year plans, but would be capable of being supplemented by year to year Budget negotiations, surpluses generated from efficiency gains, or entrepreneurial activity (such as merchandising, but not involving corporate sponsorship or advertising). Non-Charter responsibilities would be funded by any of the above supplementary sources, together with corporate sponsorship or advertising if the ABC Board so elected. Peripheral responsibilities would be funded from the Budget on a case by case basis, with any continuing Commonwealth component of funding to be transferred elsewhere.

Evans envisaged the ABC's relationship with government as a contract with mutual rights and duties. A Charter that better articulated the ABC's roles and priorities would serve as a 'bill of rights' to enable it to demand funds necessary to fulfil its statutory obligations. In return, government could allocate funds on a more accountable basis.

However, in an address to the ABC Friday Club on 26 February 1988, Senator Evans stated that, while the government felt there was scope within the ABC for improved efficiencies in staffing and managerial areas, the corporation would be unable to painlessly absorb any major cuts to the real level of funding. He argued that



any narrowing of the ABC's functions should not be accompanied by a commensurate reduction in real funding, but rather a re-allocation to the remaining functions to enable them to be better performed.

The Paper, however, did not stimulate the debate it had called for. Instead, it met a hostile response from the ABC, which interpreted it as an attempt to exert greater control over its functions and as a precursor to funding cuts. The then Managing Director, David Hill, responded by initiating the 'eight cents a day' campaign. One positive outcome, however, was the Government's agreement to fund the ABC on a triennial basis, which allowed the ABC to better plan its programming output and better manage its funding.

Our ABC

In September 1994, the then Shadow Minister for Communications, Senator Alston, chaired the Senate Select Committee on ABC Management and Operations (the Alston Committee).

The Alston Committee was established to examine allegations of impropriety in the manner in which the ABC received commercial funding, made by former ABC journalist John Millard. Although the then Chairman of the ABC, Mark Armstrong, had commissioned George Palmer, QC to investigate the matter (who ultimately found that some breaches of the ABC's *Editorial Policies* had occurred), the Alston Committee was directed to examine broader questions of the Corporation's management and direction.

Its terms of reference forked into three main lines of inquiry. First, whether the ABC's foray into commercial ventures such as International

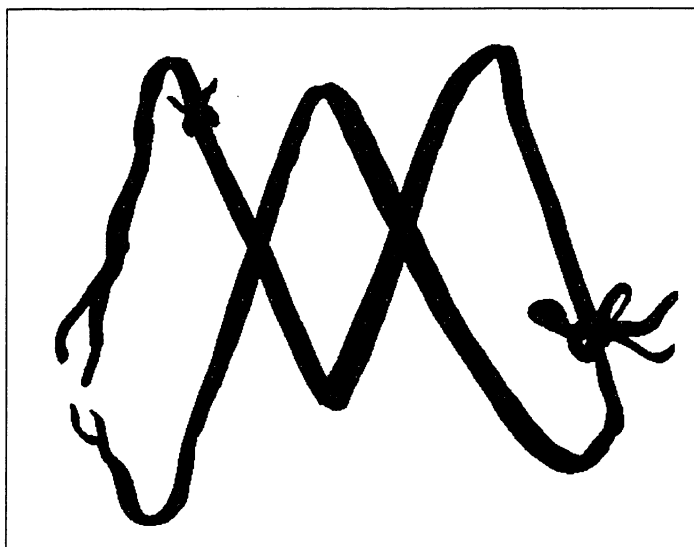
Evan's program priorities

Charter
 News
 Current affairs
 Drama
 The arts
 Children
 Educational
 Information
 Political matter

Non-Charter
 Light Entertainment
 Sports
 Family activities
 Religious matter

Peripheral
 Overseas broadcasting
 Orchestras
 Public concerts
 Parliamentary broadcasts

Television (ATV), was consistent with the fulfilment of its so-called 'core' or 'traditional Charter' activities. Second, whether its use of third party funds to co-finance programs compromised



the ABC's independence. Third, the merits of a proposal - supported by David Hill, opposed by the Board - to abolish regional TV News in favour of centralised news services.

The Alston Committee received 96 submissions over a period of three weeks and conducted seven public hearings (in Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra), during which it heard from 57 witnesses.

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The Alston Committee's report, *Our ABC*, generally endorsed the ABC's structure and objectives. While it argued that traditional free-to-air services not suffer by the ABC's involvement in commercial activities, it acknowledged the need for the ABC to take up such challenges and affirmed the capacity of its organisational structure to deal adequately with them. In order to assist this process, however, the Alston Committee recommended the organisational separation of the ABC's 'core' and 'commercial' activities and proposed that the ABC broadcaster be required to seek parliamentary approval if it wished to fund commercial ventures using budget appropriations.

On the issue of regionalism, the Alston Committee strongly endorsed the Board's approach, affirming the need for management and program initiatives to be decentralised in order to maintain the ABC's goal of diversity and acknowledging that this need could warrant an increase in funding to the broadcaster. It recommended a maintenance of funding to the ABC at least its current levels and supported a continuation of the triennial funding arrangements. □ AG