



New life for community broadcasting?

Tony Douglas, Consultant, Community Broadcasting Foundation, takes a close look at the Coalition's plans for taking broadcasting to the people

The Coalition's National and Community Broadcasting Policy 'Better Broadcasting' announced on 15 January claims to put community broadcasting on the map.

The new policy direction of the Coalition has been welcomed by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) which sees it as 'a very real commitment to the sector.' The Coalition policy tends towards a 'whole of industry' approach. It's the first time a political party has recognised the value of the sector's role in the media and arts industry and mapped out a future direction by providing access to new media technology.

The policy specifically refers to a new funding model which will 'recognise the contribution of community broadcasters to the development of Australian culture and the skills of our creative industries.' The lack of recognition of this contribution in the past has cost the community broadcasting sector millions of dollars and inhibited its development.

Just one example will illustrate this point. Community broadcasting is a major vocational entry level training ground for the broadcast industry and the journalism profession. A quick and incomplete survey of community radio stations in 1995 came up with a list of over 800 people who had started work in the community sector and later moved into careers in the mainstream media. Without recognition and funds from either industry or government, community broadcasting (the financially weakest sector of the industry) has been massively cross-subsidising the rest of the industry. A proper national

industry training strategy would provide the sector with more resources, end the cross-subsidy and produce a better skills-base for the industry.

Significantly, the policy also maps out a future for community broadcasting by providing access to digital and on-line technologies. This includes a commitment to develop a strategy for the migration of community radio broadcasting to Digital Sound Broadcasting (DSB) technology. There is also \$900,000 over three years to fund the construction of the Community Access Network (CAN). The CAN is a computer network with digital audio sound editing, storage and transfer capacity, access to the Internet and, an upgrade capacity to handle multimedia production.

In addition there has been an extra \$150,000 pa. over three years allocated to cover the costs of the uplink for the community radio satellite service, a highly successful service which links 90 radio stations.

The Coalition has committed itself to developing a long-term strategy for the sector, where funding is allocated with regard to the growth of the sector. This means that community broadcasters will be able to negotiate policy development and funding arrangements for our work in entry level training, production of local content, the development of community TV and our role in providing and managing community access to new media technologies.

Only general references are made in the policy statement about the sector's role in training and provision of local content.

Community television has been promised an independent role on

Australia's cable networks. The Coalition has supported the current statutory review of the sixth free-to-air TV channel but said it does not see the need for another commercial network. A television production fund and access to both the free-to-air and cable networks will be priorities in post-election negotiations.

The Coalition has recognised the lack of research and policy development in these areas by providing community broadcasting with \$150,000 a year over three years for the development and operation of an on-line Community Broadcasting Database. This will enable the sector to better co-ordinate its resources, market its services and play a larger role in the development of government policy.

There is also support for ethnic community broadcasters who will receive an extra \$1 million a year for the next three years. This will help cover the decline in funding, in real terms, for ethnic broadcasting from \$50 per hour ten years ago to \$28 per hour in 1996.

A recognised and funded vocational training ground for industry? A stable and supported community TV sector on free-to-air and cable? A future in providing and managing access to on-line and multimedia technology? These changes would definitely put community broadcasting on the map. The Coalition policy doesn't go that far but if elected on March 2 they have made a commitment to negotiate these issues - and that, at least, is a start. □

Tony Douglas is a Canberra based consultant to the Community Broadcasting Foundation and the views expressed in this article are his own.