



## The Mansfield Review: cautious, conservative and supportive

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**W**hat did Senator Richard Alston expect when he commissioned a review of the role and functions of the ABC?

Certainly he wanted changes to the ABC Charter. This vague and unsatisfactory document, suggested the Minister, had 'allowed the national broadcaster to expand into new areas at the expense of traditional roles'. Senator Alston believed the ABC should return to traditional activities such as news, current affairs, rural and remote services, and children's programming not provided by the commercial networks.

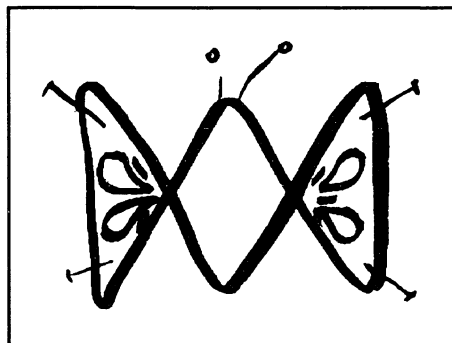
Yet the Minister also indicated an interest in greater contracting out of drama and other 'non-core programming'. ABC staff needed the discipline of competition. Conventional public broadcasting content would be tied to new management methods.

### **Alston pleased...**

On those criteria, Senator Alston should be pleased with the report delivered in just six months by former business executive Bob Mansfield. It is a document positive in tone and restrained in its recommendations. On accepting the report the Minister noted suggestions for a new ABC Charter, and congratulated Mansfield for 'a fair and balanced report' which took into account 'the tremendous number of submissions and strong public feelings about the ABC'.

The Minister also singled out for mention report recommendation number 15, which requires the ABC to outsource the majority of non-news and current affairs television production over the next three years. He welcomed suggestions the Corporation rationalise property hold-

ings and close its international broadcasting services. All the Mansfield recommendations, promised Senator Alston, will be considered 'in the context of the upcoming Budget'.



### **...ABC reaction mixed**

It is harder to say what the ABC expected from the review. The sense of relief evident in Corporation responses suggests the worst had been averted. ABC Chair Donald McDonald described the report as a 'fair appraisal of recent achievements and directions of ABC management'. Managing Director Brian Johns also welcomed the report as a 'firm endorsement' of the new management structure adopted by the Corporation while the review was under way, but was critical of suggestions to tender out television production.

There were some dissenting voices. Strike action was threatened if ABC management or the government proceeded with the recommendation to contract out television, or to close Radio Australia. Secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union's ABC division, Ms Lisa Fowkes, warned that recommendation 15 could cost up to one-fifth of all ABC jobs from the present workforce of 5,000. 'The report' she concluded, 'has delivered what the Government

wanted from day one – a smaller, compromised and weaker ABC with its creative heart removed'.

Former ABC Managing Director David Hill was also scathing. 'Of all the blows that have struck the ABC in recent times' he suggested, 'the Mansfield report will prove to be the most damaging'. It would close down ABC operations in every capital city and leave the organisation without its own television production capacity. 'Make no mistake' concluded Hill, 'this is the end of the ABC as we have known it'.

### **More evolutionary than bold**

Well perhaps... but the Mansfield document appears more evolutionary than bold. It lacks the comprehensive recommendations of the 1981 Dix report or the reforming zeal of the 1996 National Commission of Audit report. Mansfield begins by supporting traditional programming values and rejecting advertising or sponsorship for the Corporation. He dismisses the purchaser-provider model for public broadcasting promoted by the Department of Finance. Though Mansfield suggests devolving orchestras to state-based organisations, this is consistent with the 1985 Tribe Report. And Mansfield is hardly the first to argue that services such as Radio Australia should be 'considered in the context of the public diplomacy effort' rather than seen as core business of the Corporation.

Even the controversial recommendation 15 is an argument about quantum rather than direction. ABC management was planning to make 30 percent of non-news and current affairs programming contestable within three years. Mansfield sug-

## The Report in a nutshell

### Functions

- no advertising or sponsorship
- to remain a comprehensive broadcaster
- free to air transmissions the core business
- new charter

### Organisation

- to be relieved of international services (Radio Australia, Australia Television)
- structural separation of orchestras
- divestiture of property that does not have strategic value to its broadcasting functions

- programs other than news and current affairs, outsourced 'to the maximum degree possible' - at least a majority over the next 3 years

### Editorial standards

- ABC to publish methodologies used for monitoring the balance and objectivity of programming and regularly publish its analyses
- ABC to continue to monitor community expectations regarding program standards

### Management

- smaller, more responsible and

accountable management

- continuation of general workplace reforms

### Funding

- maintenance of triennial funding
- retention of financial savings from closure of Radio Australia and sale of fixed assets
- possible one-off grant to assist funding for digitisation

*Successful implementation will allow ABC to provide present domestic services within budget and fund the recommended digitisation program. AG*

gests a figure somewhere over 50 percent during the same period. As Brian Johns acknowledged, the point of difference is not the principle but the balance.

The review supports decisions taken by the ABC Board to end the organisational division between television and radio. The ABC and Mansfield have stressed the programming implications of digital technology, which allows the same program material to be used by a number of media. Both make the case for an integrated management structure.

In recommendations aimed at government, Mansfield promotes standard items from the ABC agenda – triennial funding, retention of savings and even a 'modest one-off grant' toward the cost of digital technology. While the report accepts cuts already announced for the ABC it neither advocates, nor justifies, further budget reduction.

### Charter reform

Much of the report revolves around the ABC Charter. Mansfield offers a telling critique of the present legisla-

tion and offers a revised draft for public discussion. While Brian Johns rejects criticism of the present formulation – 'I must say that the Charter has not hindered the Corporation's operations in any way' was his curious defence in an ABC press release welcoming the report – it would be hard to object to the Mansfield draft. It emphasises domestic free-to-air broadcasting as the core activity of the Corporation, retains the notion of a 'comprehensive' range of services, stresses the need for accurate and impartial news and current affairs, localism, regional and cultural diversity and special audiences such as children and youth, and calls on the ABC to make use of Australia's creative resources.

Such a Charter is close to the Alston agenda, but also consistent with the thousands of submissions received from loyal ABC users and with the 'key principles' described in the Corporation's submission to the review.

Mansfield offers no radical reworking of the Corporation. His programming vision is perhaps more tra-

ditional than some current Directors may wish ('innovation' has disappeared from the proposed Charter). Report recommendations push harder toward contracting out than the ABC intends, with unhappy consequent implications for workforce and property holdings. There are some losses, such as Radio Australia, which will distress audiences and those employed there.

Yet in the overall configuration, the Corporation survives this review, as does its (now reduced) base funding, its six radio and one television network, its mission and purpose. The report shows, once again, the bedrock of support for the ABC in the community, the value millions place on its services, and the political risks for any government in too overt hostility toward a popular institution. Whatever the fears – or hopes – Mansfield has delivered a cautious, conservative and ultimately supportive report into an organisation he has clearly grown to admire. □

**Glyn Davis is author of *Breaking up the ABC (Allen and Unwin, 1988)***