



## Bob stands on his record

*IN AN address given to the Sydney Institute on 25 February, Bob Mansfield, author of *The Challenge of a better ABC*, offered a frank account of his task of reviewing the nation's primary public broadcaster.*

**M**ansfield earnestly defended the short consultation process that took place during the Review. When first announced, the six week period for receipt and consideration of written submissions to the Review attracted significant criticism. Comparisons were made with the 1981 Dix Review, which took place over a period of 18 months and offered wider opportunities for views to be aired, including a number of public hearings.

Mansfield argued that in the prevailing environment, the ABC's situation was so critical that anything other than a short review process would have done the organisation a disservice. He rejected allegations that his review had adopted a 'closed door approach': he saw little point in conducting public hearings - which 'provided little more than emotion and didn't address the hard issues' - and was satisfied that all possible opinions had been canvassed through the submission process and through extensive consultation with a range of interested groups. Despite the official deadline of four weeks, the Review continued to accept submissions until the Report's drafting. Mansfield visited each capital city as well as Darwin and Cairns, meeting with the Friends of the ABC and others. At a temporary office in Gore Hill, he made himself available to any ABC employee who wished to speak with him, and spoke to those he wished to speak to. He adopted an even-handed approach to all political parties, and stressed that his relations with SPAA (the Screen Producers' Association of Australia, whose arguments for production outsourcing found favour with the Report) were as arms-length as those with any other lobby group.

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### Localism

While outlining the major recommendations of his Report, Mansfield presented as an enthusiastic convert to the principle of localism, stressing that locally based news and information programs were 'literally, a life-line' for regional audiences. Moreover, he argued the importance of regional perspectives to metropolitan audiences, asserting that the mutual existence and influence of metropolitan and regional programming was the essence of public broadcasting in Australia.

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### Radio

Mansfield noted that there were 3.75 times as many submissions relating primarily to radio as there were to television, with Radio National audiences comprising 30% of all submissions. He was particularly surprised at the depth of support for the Triple J youth network, which enjoyed 'an enormous relationship with the wider community - children, parents and grandparents all expressing their support'. He regarded Triple J as 'an extraordinarily efficient element of the organisation' which 'should be an important reference point' for the rest of the ABC.

Defending his recommendation that the ABC be relieved of responsibility for Radio Australia, Mansfield argued that, faced with the imperative of funding cuts, domestic audiences were ultimately more important than international audiences. While agreeing that there were clear foreign policy factors relevant to Radio Australia's future, he stressed that such matters were outside his Review's terms of reference and considered it appropriate that the Senate Inquiry is examining those aspects.

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### Outsourcing

In regard to the Report's recommendation that the majority of the ABC's non-news and current affairs programs be available to be commissioned to outside companies, Mansfield stated that the local \$1.3 billion production industry presented a 'big area of opportunity'. The sources of creative talent were writers, actors and directors - in that order - two of which resided outside the ABC. By casting its net wider than its own organisation, the ABC would have access to the best the industry has to offer.

When questioned by an audience member as to the relative costs of in-house and external production, Mansfield admitted that he had not undertaken such an analysis, partly because the industry had declined to disclose its figures on grounds of commercial sensitivity. 'As a manager', however, 'looking at the acres [of ABC production facilities]...and the number of employees, I'd be very surprised if the ABC could be cheaper than commercial outsourcing'.

Mansfield was also asked whether he saw part of the ABC's role as being a 'cultural trendsetter' (under Mansfield's proposed Charter, the ABC would no longer need to be 'innovative'). Mansfield replied that he saw the ABC more as providing a 'broader spectrum' than commercial networks, 'where people could come along and take off the shelf what they want'.

Mansfield expressed satisfaction with the overall response to his Report, including the 'balanced reaction by many vested interests'. The bean-counters would be happy too, as the Review came in significantly under budget. □