



ON AIR

Newsletter of Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) Inc

INSIDE:

President's Report cont.	-2-
Free Trade Agreement	-2-
Notice of Motion AGM	-2-
Annual General Meeting	-2-
And here is the National Sports Report	-3-
Committee Members	-3-
A Parliamentary Lobby Group	-4-
Senator Humphries meets the FABC	-4-
Nomination form for ACT Committee	-4-

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS TO THE FABC COMMITTEE

Our committee can have up to 11 members, and we call for nominations from among our members to take part. If you can help with things like keeping an eye on news coverage of the ABC, helping with running FABC stalls, taking an interest in politicians' statements about the ABC, helping out with our newsletter, organising public events etc. etc....

Please fill out the nomination form in this newsletter, or nominate someone else, and send it to the address below before 4 June 2004.

**Friends of the ABC
(ACT & Region) Inc**

GPO Box 2625

CANBERRA ACT 2600

PRESIDENTS REPORT

by Margaret O'Connor

You will have noted Darce Cassidy's article in this edition of 'Background Briefing' in relation to the special funding (\$17 million a year for four years) allocated to the ABC in the 2001 May Budget. This funding, due to cease at the end of June 2005, has been used in regional initiatives which are now under threat due to its short term nature.

Local Friends may not be aware that this special funding has also made possible the reintroduction of the weekend news bulletin for the Northern Territory and the ACT. The value of this service was highlighted during the January 2003 Bushfire Emergency period which demonstrated the dedication and professionalism of the local ABC staff who were able to keep the worried residents of the ACT informed as to the whereabouts of the fires and the level of the emergency. If this special funding does not continue, the weekend Canberra news bulletin may be threatened in addition to the broadcasting services and staff made possible in other areas of regional Australia.

ABC Managing Director Russell Balding has spoken out strongly in support of these services to the ACT and the Northern Territory in the 2003-4 Senate Estimates hearings, when calling for the continuation of these funds.

Mr Balding also advised that although the funding is technically available until June 2005, separation and redundancy costs have to be paid for out of the current funding, so would result in the winding back of some of the programming sooner than 2005. Does this mean that the popular ACT/Northern Territory news bulletins are soon to cease?

As Darce points out, the Friends have long argued the impractical nature of this type of short term funding arrangement, which allows for broadcasting services to be set up, only to be then dismantled when funds dry up. Instead, such funds should be rolled permanently into the ABC's budget.

At a national level, the Friends will continue to give this issue the attention and media profile it deserves. We urge members to do the same, by raising the issue with local Members of Parliament (see the report on our meeting with Senator Gary Humphries) and by way of letters to the editor. Members of your local Friends committee can assist with background information if required.

On another note, some of you may have noticed the report in the Sun Herald (7 March 2004) which stated that the axing of ABC's Radio National will be discussed by ABC Management over the next two months. You will note the 'Background Briefing' article in relation to this. While this one-off report advised of nothing more definite at this stage than ABC Management discussions, you can imagine the effect this report had on your state Friends of the ABC committee members.

cont..... page 2

APRIL 2004

We don't need to tell you, our members, that Radio National is the jewel in the crown of Australian Public Broadcasting, beloved of Australians from Manangatang to Mosman. Its very dedicated staff produce wonderful specialist programming, on a shoestring budget, in a marvellous fulfilment of the ABC Charter requirements. The Friends sincerely hope that this particular cost-saving measure as reported by the Sun Herald is not seriously being considered by ABC Management. If it were, a huge public backlash would ensue.

However, there would be no need for discussions regarding any ABC program axing if there were a restoration of its severely depleted base funding.

The Government is responsible for ABC funding, not ABC Management. Sufficient

funding would enable the ABC to fulfil its Charter requirements of specialist programming such as rural/regional services, (including the two weekend Territory broadcast services) and the wonderful broadcasting available to the public on Radio National. The Government has the opportunity to show its commitment to public broadcasting by giving this matter urgent attention in the forthcoming May budget as a significant surplus, about which we keep hearing, is predicted in this key election year. Continued and persistent grassroots action by Friends membership will help the keep ABC funding issues in the public and political eye. ■

Margaret O'Connor
President

Australia's Free Trade Agreement with the US

It's a deal! Announced on Monday 9 February, the detail is finally out -and according to an analysis by the Australian Fair Trade Network we have plenty to worry about:

Australian content in film, television and music

"The government claims that USFTA protects Australian content and culture. In reality, there are strict limits on future governments' ability to ensure that Australian voices continue to be heard.

Under Annex I, Australia's existing local content quotas are "bound", and if they are reduced in the future they cannot later be restored to existing levels. Under Annex II, future Australian governments are limited in the laws they can introduce for new media" extract from AFTINET analysis.

Why are we worried?

If you have read the Australian version of what has been agreed to you'd think that local content rules are intact: current levels and also any future increases, applying to new media as well as to existing media, have been protected. But according to the US version there was said to be improved market access for US films and television programs on cable, satellite and the internet.

Now we know that we have traded away future options for making changes to local content controls.

What's next?

A Trade Agreement, like any treaty or for that matter any declaration of war, does not have to get parliamentary approval; however some aspects of the treaty would require legislation, so those can be determined by the Parliament.

A Joint Standing Committee on Treaties must review any treaty and table its report in Parliament. It has called for submissions, and will report by 23 June. In addition to this process a Senate Select Committee has been set up and will receive submissions until 30 April. It will assess what if any benefits there will be overall - and, one would hope, what disadvantages there might be.

Detailed information:

The fine print, and also a briefer guide to the AUSFTA, are available on the DFAT website :

http://www.dfat.gov.au/trade_negotiations/us.html

The analysis by AFTINET can be found on www.aftinet.org.au ■

Jill Greenwell,
FABC Free Trade Watch
(Gary Cook, NSW; Peter Monie, Vic;
Jill Greenwell, ACT)

Notice of Motion to Amend the Constitution:

At the moment our financial year ends on 31 March, therefore our AGM has to be held at a time of the year which is often cold, making attendance at the AGM in the middle of winter rather unenticing.

Your committee is therefore proposing the following motion:

That this Annual General Meeting of Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) resolves to:

Amend Section (30) of the Constitution to read:

→ The Branch's financial year shall commence on 1 July and conclude on 30 June of the following calendar year.

Amend the first sentence of Section (10) of the Constitution to read:

→ The AGM shall be held no earlier than 1 August and no later than 30 November. ■

AGM GENERAL MEETING

WHEN: SAT 5 JUNE 2004
2.30 p.m.

WHERE: Room 1,
Ground level
GRIFFIN CENTRE,
CIVIC

GUEST SPEAKER: JACKIE FRENCH

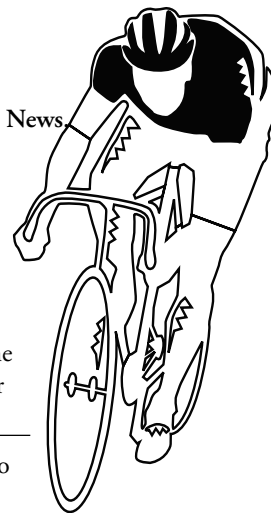
Jackie will be known to many of you as an author and as a frequent guest on local radio 666. She lives out of Braidwood, in the Araluen Valley, where she grows all sorts of produce, gardens with imagination & enthusiasm, cooks, and cares for - or copes with - the abundant wildlife.

*She chose for her topic:-
WOMBATS, WEEDS &
WIDDLEBERRIES....true
confessions of 15
years of TV, books
and radio.*

And here is the National Sports Report...

Controversy has surrounded the new national sport report being shown as part of the 7pm ABC television News.

The following extracts were taken from the transcript of the Senate Estimates hearing Monday 16 Feb* between Russell Balding, Managing Director of the ABC and Senator Kate Lundy (ALP). Hopefully this will clarify the matter.



Russell Balding speaking on the new weeknight national sports coverage

Mr Balding - This gives me the opportunity to put on the public record that there has been a lot of misinformation about this issue. I would like to say up front that there will be no reduction in local sports coverage on ABC television on the 7 p.m. news. The aim of the new segment is to bring a sharper focus to the ABC's prime time coverage of national and international sporting events that have relevance across Australia to all Australians. It will free up time for the various state sports reporters to concentrate on local sports issues.

Rather than have six or seven journalists, individually in the various states, reporting on a sport where the coverage of that sport has relevance across Australia, if possible it will be reported in one bulletin across Australia. That will provide a sharper focus.

and on a national sport with intense local interest.....

Senator LUNDY - you could have the AFL covered in two different segments in the same sports bulletin.

Mr Balding - Yes.

Senator LUNDY - Are you seriously proposing that?

Mr Balding - If it is relevant. One at a national level and one in much more detail, if it is relevant to that local state. Yes, that could be a likely scenario.

Senator LUNDY - Doesn't that defeat the purpose of having a more efficient coverage, if you have two separately produced AFL bulletins in a number of the states?

Mr Balding - No, I do not think so. In actual fact, it highlights the issue. Where it has relevance, we will have one report covering it all, which frees up the time for the local journalist to concentrate on those issues that are more relevant to the local state and the local community.

an example, at the height of the season.....

Senator LUNDY - What would you define as a national AFL story during the winter season?

Mr Balding - It could have anything to do with a particular coach or any scandal regarding a team rather than the specific results. Remember that this is the midweek we are talking about here, not the weekend. This does not affect the weekend news sports coverage.

from Sydney? How national's that?????

Mr Balding - It will come out of Sydney as a production.

Senator LUNDY - Do you think that is smart policy, given that the AFL is in Victoria? How on earth do you expect your Sydney team to be able to do that with any competence?

Mr Balding - The AFL is not only in Victoria, I am sorry; the AFL is throughout Australia. It is a national sport. I really think that the bulk of the audience do not really care where it comes out of, provided it covers the issues that the audience are interested in. Whether it comes out of Sydney, Melbourne or Perth is irrelevant as long as the quality of the production is there in covering the issues.

Mr Balding - it is an exercise in sharpening our sports coverage. Normally we get applauded for these sorts of things. We are trying to sharpen up our sports coverage; we do not want to compromise our local sports coverage. Within the limited time that we have on the 7 p.m. bulletin during midweek, we want to ensure that sport is covered properly. ■

* (available on www.aph.gov.au/Senate - and follow the 'Find' tab)

CURRENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS



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Senator Gary Humphries meets FABC

On Thursday 11 March Committee members Jill Greenwell and Bob Hodge met Gary Humphries in Parliament House, and we discussed the May Budget and the ABC's submission for funds for 2004 - 2005.

As I write, Government Ministers are determining the Budget which will be handed down in May, and for Friends of the ABC an important item is the ABC's request for renewed funding for the regional and rural programming initiatives, of which ACT news coverage on weekend television was a part.

Last year we contacted Senator Humphries, along with the other ACT representatives in

parliament, after the Government's rejection of the ABC's Triennial Funding Submission. He said then "I was also hoping for a significant funding boost. I am aware of the importance of the ABC in providing Australians with fearless and impartial news, and value its contribution to our sense of national identity.... I am sure you were pleased when, under this Government, ABC Canberra reinstated local television news".

We saw him later, in October 2003, when he said that he still stood by his statement that the ABC needed a 'significant boost' in funding and that 'I will be an advocate within the Government for such a boost'.

Now, before the May 2004 Budget, Senator Humphries said that he would shortly be seeing the Minister for Communications, Daryl Williams, to argue for the retention of ABC funding generally, and specifically insisting on funds for the continuation of the local ABC television weekend news service.

Friends of the ABC should be adding our weight to the cause of adequate ABC funding. Write now - to Senator Humphries or to the Minister for Communications - before it's too late! ■

Jill Greenwell

A Parliamentary Lobby Group

At its February meeting your committee agreed to the formation of a group which would be a regular link between Friends of the ABC and politicians who can influence the fortunes of the ABC.

The idea arises out of our ability, in Canberra, to contact politicians fairly easily. The ACT and Region Branch of course is happy for other Branches to join us whenever they can - but in practice that's not easy for them, at least not on an ongoing basis.

We hope to establish and maintain contact with the shadow minister, party spokespersons on communications, the Minister for Communications, and relevant parliamentary committees and backbench committees. An important task will be to inform the other FABC Branches, as well as our local members, about the contact we make.

The meeting with Lindsay Tanner, the ALP Shadow Minister for Communications, was initiated by your ACT President (see report in Background Briefing), and this is the sort of contact which it is important for us to maintain.

If you are interested in taking part in the 'lobby group' please phone Jill Greenwell (62533531). At our first planning meeting Chas Savage, Monica Pflaum, Brian Hill, Rick Godfrey, Bob Hodge and I got the ball rolling.

We hope to share around the meetings with politicians and their staffers, and we also need backroom help in the way to proceed and in keeping up with current issues, so please consider taking part. ■

Jill Greenwell

CHECK IT
OUT



www.friendsoftheabc.org

Here you will find lots of handy information (including the Friends national newsletter -Background Briefing).

FABC WEBSITE

Nominations are called for members of the committee for Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) Inc.
(See page 1 for details)

NOMINATION FORM FOR THE ACT COMMITTEE

NOMINATION

I would like to nominate _____ for a position on the committee of the Friends of the ABC (ACT & Region) Inc.

Signed: _____

Seconded: _____

Date: _____

ACCEPTED

I agree to the above nomination

Signed: _____ (nominee)

Date: _____

Please post to reach the address on bottom of page 1 by 4 June 2004