



ON AIR

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

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SPECIAL SHOW PREVIEW

Shortis and Simpson start a new show at the Street Theatre in November and we are privileged to be able to offer our members a private preview.

When: Tuesday 18 November

Where: Street Theatre

For details - see page two of this newsletter'

FTA RALLY

For those members who might want to attend a rally in opposition to the FTA on 27 October.

When: Monday 27 October - 12:30pm

Where: Parliament House, Canberra

More information about the FTA can be found at www.aftinet.org.au

Full details can be found on page four.

PRESIDENTS REPORT

by Margaret O'Connor

"The Friends of the ABC National Conference, held on the first weekend of September in Perth, has positioned the community group to keep effectively pushing ABC issues prior to the 2004 election. It is not often that all the State Presidents have the chance to meet face to face with each other. The conference, ably hosted by the WA branch of the Friends was a great opportunity to build links and to strengthen our resolve in the beautiful surrounds of the Heathcote Cultural Centre, Applecross, Perth, overlooking the Swan River.

Amongst the issues discussed were funding and commercialisation. The Friends are in the process of researching the latest ABC funding situation which will enable us to review our position on this issue and formulate a plan to get the ABC funding message out into the community. The recent axing of 'Behind the News', described as 'Four Corners for Kids' is tragic, but the reaction from some quarters showed that maybe the Friends need to work harder at establishing in the community's mind the real effects of depleted ABC funding. The ABC must be funded adequately to fulfil its Charter requirements which of course extend beyond News and Current Affairs into the important areas of education, such as children's programming like 'BTN.

It is hard to see how the ABC can fulfil its Charter requirements with its current funding situation, when, according to a recent Macquarie bank report, ABC funding per capita is seventeenth out of eighteen when compared to similar international public broadcasters. If more program cuts occur, it is most important that the Friends steer the recriminations away from the Broadcaster back to the real issue which is one of core funding. Recently we saw some politicians attempt to muddy the waters when news of the BTN axing was announced.

We are also in the process of reviewing our position in relation to ABC commercialisation. The Friends have in the past advocated an amendment to the ABC Act 1983 to allow the current ban on advertising to extend to all ABC products and services, including the on-line service. (The internet did not, of course, exist in 1983). It may be worth discussing other aspects of this issue. We will be advising members of our new position on these issues as soon as they are established.

On a lighter note, many thanks to the FABC (ACT and Region) secretary, Jill Greenwell, for organising this year's Christmas function which, with the assistance of Shortis and Simpson, should be a fantastic night.

Hope to see you there with loads of your friends. ■

Cheers

Margaret O'Connor.

Australian's believe ABC well managed and valued

The Managing Director of the ABC, Russell Balding, today released details of research conducted by Newspoll indicating that 89 percent of Australians believe the ABC provides a valuable service to the community. The national poll was conducted in June 2003 among 1900 respondents aged 14 years and over.

Mr Balding said the percentage of respondents who believed the ABC does a good job of being efficient and well managed had increased from 61 to 68% from the previous survey.

"It is immensely gratifying and encouraging to see the ABC remains an appreciated and valuable part of the lives of Australians and that there was an increase in the number of Australians who believed the ABC was well managed. This is reflected in the Newspoll research that highlights continued audience support for ABC programs," Mr Balding said.

"This research provides a confirmation that audiences are continuing to enjoy the ABC and they consider that it provides quality content that is distinctively Australian while doing a good job in fulfilling its Charter obligations".

Highlights of the survey include:

- 89% of Australians believe the ABC provides a valuable service to the community.
- The percentage of Australians who believed the ABC does a good job of being efficient and well managed increased from 61 to 68% from the previous survey.
- 82% of Australians believe the ABC does a good job of being distinctively Australian and contributing to Australia's identity.
- Consistent with 2002, 89% of the ABC website users believe it provides good quality information, and the

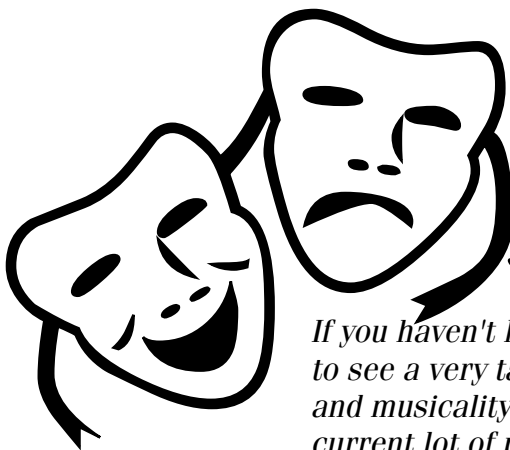
proportion who believe it is "very good" is up from 32 to 38%.

- Many more Australians (76%) believe the ABC does a good job covering country/ regional issues than believe this about commercial media (42%).

These results are consistent with surveys conducted by Newspoll in 1998, 1999 and 2002.

The issue of being balanced and even handed was explored more specifically in relation to the 7pm News, 7.30 Report, The World Today, AM and PM. As found in the 2002 survey, the vast majority (ranging from 85-93%) of viewers or listeners believe each program does a good job of being balanced and even handed.

"The ABC is valued and appreciated by the Australian community while we continue to dedicate ourselves to the creation of more quality and innovative Australian content," Mr Balding said. ■



Christmas on the House

Moya Simpson and John Shortis

If you haven't had a chance to catch Shortis and Simpson, here's your opportunity to see a very talented duo who will delight you with their special brand of humour and musicality. They specialise in political satire with songs that send up our current lot of pollies and their goings-on, through to songs that target stories, events and characters from our political history.

Shortis and Simpson start a new show at the Street Theatre in November and we are privileged to be able to offer our members a private preview.

Tuesday 18 November

8.30 p.m.

Tickets:- \$25 each or \$15 pensioner/concession

Tickets are available by advance booking only. Please send your cheque, payable to FABC (Act and Region), with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to
**'Christmas on the House', FABC
GPO Box 2625,
Canberra 2601**

Why not make up a table for dinner before the show at 'As You Like It', the Street Theatre cafe bar. Main meals range from \$15 - \$20. BYO and licensed. The cafe will open specially for us, **but bookings are essential - phone 62628085**

LETTER TO THE CHAIRMAN

Recently our secretary, Jill Greenwell, wrote to the Chairman of the ABC Board and raised a number of issues. A copy of her letter appears below.

Office of Donald McDonald AO,
Chairman,
Australian Broadcasting Corporation,
G.P.O. Box 9994
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr. McDonald,

I am writing on behalf of the Friends of the ABC (ACT and Region) to convey our confidence in the existing complaints review procedures, and in the ABC's accountability in general.

One of the reasons that our membership enjoys, and relies on, ABC coverage of current affairs is that it is probing, thorough, and covers a range perspectives - all of which provoke thought. The series of interviews, usually with opponents as well as proponents of a current issue, is crucially important to many of us who want to understand what is going on around us, to understand even if not to agree with, both sides of a question, and to be able to determine our own position - on political, social, religious or economic affairs.

This sort of coverage may be in magazine-style radio programmes (like 'The Media Report'), current affairs commentary (like 'AM') or television documentaries, of which 4 Corners has been an outstanding example for decades. It provokes opposition as well as support, but not because of outrageous oversimplification; rather because of uncomfortable truths and complexity.

It is alarming that in a country such as Australia, with its ethos of rugged individuality and scorn for authority, the response to criticism should be the smear of bias on the part of the critic. The ABC's own internal guidelines on impartiality are an object lesson in the subtlety of aiming for impartiality -to inquire critically, to investigate thoroughly, and to base opinion on demonstrated research, but not to be bland.

THE REPLY - A Summary

The reply, sent by Geoffrey Crawford, Director of Corporate Affairs, on behalf of Donald McDonald, thanked us for our support of ABC news and current affairs and for our thoughtful comments about the complaint handling process.

He stressed that "the Board is strongly committed to protecting the ABC's independence. It will continue to be vigorous in seeking to advance the position of the ABC, including in relation to ensuring adequate levels of funding from Government, in making it more central to the life of all Australians, and in protecting its integrity".

He concluded by reiterating his thanks to us for taking the time to write and for our interest in the ABC. ■

The manner in which the complaints lodged by the Minister for Communications were investigated was impressive: reassuring that the ABC is so thorough in monitoring its claimed independence, impartiality and accuracy; but also reassuring that the journalists' professionalism was vindicated.

The procedure, to have complaints reviewed initially by ABC personnel, but independent of the original programmers, is a reasonable one - and noteworthy as itself being a response last year to requests for greater transparency.

The existence of the Independent Complaints Review Panel as an appellate body from the internal ABC Complaints Review Executive is a further guarantee that complaints will be investigated disinterestedly, and the current membership of that Panel can, as Ken Inglis pointed out in the Australian of 30 July, be trusted to exercise judgment independent of the ABC.

We feel strongly that the Minister's complaints were properly, and completely, investigated, but in the light of his extreme language and his inability to accept the judgment of the Complaints Review Executive, it was appropriate for the Managing Director to take the initiative in referring the complaints to the ICRP.

As to the general governance of the ABC, our Committee was gratified to read your defence of the ABC's accountability in your letter of 6 June to the Minister for Communications. The internal procedures to monitor complaints, to develop rigorous codes of editorial practice, to test public opinion; the statutory requirements to report annually to parliament, to appear before the Senate Estimates Committee, and to comply with the Auditor-General's audit; and the over-arching requirements of the Australian Broadcasting Authority do all seem to us to be abundant evidence that the Corporation is meeting its obligations to Australians in general, and to its charter responsibilities in particular.

We were therefore very pleased that the Board expressed its confidence in the transparency of the Corporation's processes by rejecting the Minister's proposal about further reporting on news and current affairs coverage. It is important that there is public accountability, but the core business of the ABC must not be swamped by floods of procedural reviews.

Friends of the ABC believe that the ABC is a wonderful institution, with many very hard-working, talented and dedicated staff whose programmes are an inspiration to the better qualities which Australians share.

We would like to pass on to you our enthusiasm for the ABC and our pleasure in your leadership of the Board. ■

Yours sincerely,

Jill Greenwell
Secretary,
FABC (ACT & Region)
12 August 2003

NSW Friends of the ABC Rally in Sydney

Recently we notified members of a rally to be held in Sydney on 14 September. We were planning to send a busload of supporters to Sydney however this didn't eventuate. While the lack of response was disappointing it could have been due to the late notice about the event. **Thank you to those who did respond.**

John Keen from the FABC committee did attend and his report follows:

The rally commenced at noon in the Sydney Domain and was attended by several hundred people.

The gathering was addressed by a number of prominent speakers including ABC staff Board Member Romana Koval, actors Zoe Carides and John Derum, film critic Margaret Pomeranz, ABC personalities Richard Glover, Benita Collings and Quentin Dempster, former Liberal Opposition Leader John Hewson and the State Independent member for Manly, David Barr.

The addresses were brief and impassioned and delightfully moderated by Julie McCrossin with intervening periods of music and singing from a variety of performers.

The Dangers of a Detached Society

In a recent article in The Australian, Phillip Adams noted - "A slow-motion catastrophe is afflicting Western democracy. A growing indifference to politics deriving from feelings of futility and cynicism." He went on to say "We live in a devalued democracy where, increasingly, people are disengaged"

This indifference could easily lead to the slow death of many cherished public institutions, paramount amongst these is our very own ABC.

What with funding cuts and accusations of bias, Aunty is haemorrhaging. We can't afford to let the nations' pre-eminent public broadcaster die a slow death.

The speakers were concerned with the attacks on the ABC by a succession of federal governments and in particular, the current government's attack on not only the ABC, but other public institutions such as education and health.

The speakers indicated the critical need to support the ABC in its fight for adequate funding, full independence, restoration of quality programs and preservation against becoming like the public broadcasters in the United States and New Zealand.

At the conclusion of the rally, the President of the NSW Friends of the ABC Gary Cook thanked everyone for their attendance. The FABC 2001 Shareholder's Charter was re-endorsed and Gary undertook to take the concerns and issues raised at the rally to the government. (The Shareholders Charter can be seen at www.fabc.org.au.)

The rally did get some media coverage the following day, with prominence given to the speech by John Hewson where he accused the government of "losing the plot" over the ABC and failing to act in the national interest by refusing the ABC's request for extra funding. ■

John Keen
FABC Committee

The consequences of this would be dire. Without an alternative voice the Australian public could be over-run with self interested commercial media conglomerates which tend to be very soft on governments that favour privatisation over public ownership.

People Power is the only thing which will change this.

So I urge all Friends to write and email our politicians demanding proper funding for our ABC and a new system of appointment to the Board that does away with the cronyism of the past. ■

Rick Godfrey
FABC Committee

FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Friends of the ABC are concerned about possible changes to local content rules for film and television in the negotiations between Australia and the USA on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

The following information is passed on for those members who might want to attend a rally in opposition to the FTA on 27 October.

US and Australian negotiators start the next round of FTA negotiations in Canberra on 27 October. They need to know that Australians do not want a FTA which threatens or undermines the PBS, local content rules for film and television, quarantine rules and our right to say no to GE food and crops.

Speakers will include:

- ~ Doug Cameron
(National Secretary AMWU)
- ~ Senators Kerry Nettle
(Greens)
- ~ Aden Ridgeway
(Democrats) &
- ~ an ALP speaker.

**When: Monday 27 October -
12:30pm**

**Where: Parliament House,
Canberra**

More information about the FTA
can be found at
www.aftinet.org.au

VISIT THE FABC WEBSITE FOR ALL UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION
www.fabc.org.au