



# ON AIR

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

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## AGM WITH DAVID KILBY

The Annual General Meeting with guest speaker, David Kilby will be held on 12 June 2003.

Further information will be provided.

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Membership renewal is due at the end of March. Please complete and return the renewal form on the last page of this newsletter.

## STOP PRESS STOP PRESS

The ABC's bid for triennial funding is with the government now. You can see a summary of the submission at

[www.abc.net.au/corp](http://www.abc.net.au/corp)

and we urge all members to write to their local MP to support the ABC's bid for appropriate funding to maintain and enhance this vital service.

## PRESIDENTS REPORT

by Margaret O'Connor

Now that Australia is involved in armed conflict in Iraq, we need our public broadcaster more than ever to provide independently produced comprehensive news and current affairs coverage of these critical events. Against this backdrop, worrying allegations raised on 'Media Watch' (24 February) raise the possibility that the Australian media, including of course the ABC, may be being obstructed in its efforts to provide unfettered information to the community about Australian military activities in the Gulf.

Censorship of wartime reporting is of course not new to Australian military history. During World War Two, according to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, 'the Menzies Government gazetted regulations under the National Security Act which virtually placed the whole of the Australian press, radio broadcasting and film industry under the control of the Director General of Information.'

'The Director General was directly responsible to the Prime Minister and the War Cabinet and had access to both, in the same way as any other chief of staff. New regulations were introduced in January 1941 which gave the Government virtual control over what information the Australian community could receive and what people could say'. Those particularly familiar with Australian history may be aware of similar measures taken to control the reporting of other military engagements.

Although these types of wartime measures were often undertaken with the object of preventing the undermining of public morale (and other reasons), such issues must be balanced with the public's right to be informed. 'Media Watch' reports that in 2003, at the possible outset of our latest military engagement, and despite the Minister for Defence's public utterances that 'there will be proper media coverage of Australia's involvement', the Australian media has been informed by his Department that "all journalists intending to cover coalition operations (in the Gulf) must seek accreditation from US Central Command HQ".

'Media Watch' has also reported that before accreditation is granted, journalists are being asked by the Department of Defence to sign an agreement in relation to coverage of operations. Friends is seeking more information, and will keep members informed. If true, the prescription of media coverage in this fashion would strike at the whole issue of ABC editorial independence, which is of course protected under the relevant legislation, being the ABC Act 1983. The general provisions state that 'the Corporation is not subject to direction by or on behalf of

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the Government of the Commonwealth.' However, members may be interested to know that under the Act, and under certain circumstances, the Minister has special powers to direct the Corporation to broadcast certain material.

Section 78 (1) states that 'where the Minister is of the opinion that the broadcasting or televising of particular matter by the Corporation would be in the national interest' he or she has the power to '...direct the Corporation to broadcast or televise that matter from all the national broadcasting stations or national television stations or from such of them as he specifies.' This power is subject to no provisions other than the requirement to set out 'particulars of, and the reasons for, the direction to be laid before each House of the Parliament within 7 sitting days of that House after the direction was given.'

On a far happier note, laurel wreaths to everyone at ABC Canberra for the exceptional coverage of the bushfire crisis. It would be fair to say that most residents of Canberra stayed tuned to ABC Canberra 666 throughout the bushfires and beyond, grateful for the solid, reassuring and up to

date information and the calm approach to the crisis, not only broadcast to citizens but to those fighting the fires. The Friends also appreciates the fact that ABC presenters and journalists whose own property and families were under threat stayed at their posts in service to the residents of the region during this difficult, and unfortunately for some, tragic period. The Friends of the ABC has written to the Director of ABC Radio, Ms Sue Howard, advising that we would support the nomination of ABC 666 Canberra in the coming Local Radio Awards or any other form of appropriate recognition. The wonderful service offered by ABC 666 Canberra, under the direction of State Director and ABC 666 Canberra Manager, Ms Liz McGrath, reinforces the vital nature of regional public broadcasting, especially in emergency situations.

Once again, we would like to emphasise our appreciation and offer our congratulations to all involved. Until next time. ■

Margaret O'Connor  
President

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Our President, Margaret O'Connor recently had the following letter published in the Canberra Times.

The Friends of the ABC (ACT and Region) is very concerned about recent "Media Watch" allegations that the Australian media's access to preparations for the Iraqi war is being restricted and controlled.

This of course includes the ABC. Last Monday's "Media Watch" alleged that the Department of Defence has hired a prominent law firm to prepare a strict agreement with which journalists agree to comply before being accredited to cover coalition operations. Even more disturbing are reports that accreditation must be sought and obtained from United States Central Command Headquarters in the Gulf. The saying "the first casualty of war is the truth" appears disturbingly relevant given these developments.

The Friends consider it important that the Government remember the ABC's Charter which states that the ABC should "provide .... comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard" which of course includes news and current affairs reporting. The Australian public values the high standard of ABC news and current affairs and has the right to be informed about all aspects of our involvement in any military engagement. In the 21st century, all Australian media outlets, including the ABC, should be given free, unfettered and unconditional access to our military deployments. ■

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CHECK IT  
OUT



[www.fabc.org.au/act](http://www.fabc.org.au/act)

There is also lots of handy information (including the Friends' national newsletter, 'Background Briefing') on [www.friendsoftheabc.org](http://www.friendsoftheabc.org).

FABC WEBSITE

## 666 ABC Canberra - Bushfire coverage

I'm sure every one of us will never forget the outstanding job done by our local ABC radio during the bushfire crisis in January. Canberra Times cartoonist Geoff Pryor paid tribute to 666 in his cartoon of 25 January and the Rotary Club of Canberra presented the Station with the Distinguished Service Award - "In recognition of the outstanding support provided by the Station and staff to the community and people of Canberra and the ACT during the bushfire crisis of January 2003."

The audience response has also been overwhelming with hundreds of letters, e-mails, cards and even presents from people expressing their appreciation.

Liz McGrath, 666 ABC Canberra Manager has provided the following information about the bushfire coverage.

"666 began covering the fires surrounding the ACT in early January after their ignition by lightning. We kept tabs on them regularly from that point on, although they were at that stage in the mountains 50 -100 kms away.

On Saturday 18th we had preparations in place for local coverage. At 1pm we broke into the national Grandstand program for the first time with a ten minute report. We continued to put updates into Grandstand until 2.30pm when we went local and stayed local until midnight.

As the extent of the emergency became apparent, more 666 ABC Canberra staff starting showing up at the studios without being asked. From that time, all staff members worked extra hours, gave up their free time and in some cases returned early from holidays.

On Sunday 19th, we were back on air at 6am, broadcasting until 6pm, including coverage to NSW in the morning. The next Tuesday a number of suburbs were again on alert with residents advised to stay home to protect their property. This meant our entire Breakfast team was unable to get to work and replacement staff had to be found. Other key staff were also unable to attend work.

This was the day when the suburb that is home to our transmitter was at risk and we made arrangements to use the FM transmitters of JJJ and CF if needed.

Throughout the crisis, 666 staff worked closely with the ABC Newsroom, with journalists filing stories from many locations at risk and providing regular updates and interviews. There were days of very high alert and others when things were calmer and 666 tailored its coverage to meet the needs of the community.

On days when we usually take national or statewide programming we stayed local and on the Australia Day long weekend we stayed local from 6am - 7pm on all three days. When the fires were threatening areas surrounding the ACT we broadcast via ABC South East, ABC Riverina and ABC Central West.

We arranged Online streaming so that those in offices and outside the ACT could stay in touch with the latest info via our website.

We used our website: [abc.net.au/canberra](http://abc.net.au/canberra) as a community bulletin board so that the information broadcast could be accessed easily. We developed the website presence with photo galleries and stories from those affected.

### MESSAGE FROM MANAGING DIRECTOR

The following article appeared in the 21 February 2003 edition of "Inside the ABC". It was written by Russell Balding, ABC Managing Director and is reprinted here with permission:

"There has been strong positive community reaction to the work of the ABC, in particular during this summer's bushfire emergencies. We know that the ABC has always played a critical role in times of emergency, and has been relied upon to provide a source of authoritative and timely advice to people which is much valued in situations where other community services are under threat or have been disabled.

In the more recent bushfire emergencies the ABC - Radio, Television and significantly ABC Online - has clearly been a vital, at times lifesaving, resource not just to regional audiences, but to those in urban areas as well.

I wish to congratulate and thank sincerely all ABC staff involved for their dedicated efforts, in the best ABC traditions, in serving the whole community during these recent emergencies."

Our website accesses for that week were 187,600 compared to our average of 11,000.

As the immediate danger passed, 666 became part of the healing process. Both on air and online we allowed the audience to tell their stories, thank those who deserved thanks and grieve for animals and belongings that were lost.

We disseminated information on restoration of electricity, gas and sewerage services, and used our airwaves to tell the community about help available from government, insurance companies and counselling.

We immediately began planning for the ABC Bushfire Recovery Concert, a free family day of entertainment that was staged in Commonwealth Park. It was attended by 15,000 people and raised \$15,000.

Our staff contribution was significant, especially as everyone was personally affected, some with homes in risk areas or actual fires near their own homes. Unfortunately two staff lost their homes."

In addition, Andy Henley, Program Director for 666 added the following comments about support for staff. "666 ABC Canberra staff were fantastic during the bushfire crisis. They were all committed to being there when the Canberra community needed its local ABC the most.

One of the things that we had to deal with through this time was making sure that people didn't run themselves into the ground. The nature of the work was physically and emotionally draining, so we made sure that everybody took adequate breaks and had a rest whenever it was possible. We used the days of low alert to give staff time off. If their homes were threatened they were encouraged to stay away and look after family first. Staff were paid all their overtime & penalty entitlements and at no time was cost a factor in any of our coverage.

After the crisis passed, counselling sessions were arranged to monitor fatigue levels and to make sure that everyone was coping well.

ABC culture is not only about serving the community but is also about caring for staff welfare. 666 ABC Canberra did both of these things extremely well." ■

## Dinner at Tilleys with Kerry and Alex

On Wednesday 19 February some 200 Friends and other supporters of our ABC had an absorbing night at a fund-raising dinner at Tilleys Restaurant, Lyneham. We were entertained from the outset by the lilting music of Irish harpist Catriona Henderson and violinist Graeme Adler who created a great atmosphere for the evening.

Our President, Margaret O'Connor, welcomed all present and spoke of the important work that the Friends of the ABC have been involved in and the value to our community of the ABC as an institution. She then welcomed each of the guest speakers, giving us lively background information on each of them.

One of Canberra's most popular radio presenters, Alex Sloan, then provided some insights into how the ABC gave Canberrans the extremely important, indeed lifesaving information about the bushfires on that fateful day, Saturday 18 January 2003. Alex reminded us, in a vivid way, of the way events unfolded, and told us of the extraordinary way in which the ABC management and staff rose to the occasion.

Alex's talk was much appreciated, and her bushfire stories certainly reinforced the view of many Canberrans that the ABC is a vital institution at the local as well as the national and international levels, and that when we need it most it is always there, providing balanced, objective news and information but at the same time strongly reflecting local feelings and needs.

Kerry O'Brien, who had presented the 7.30 Report from the ABC Canberra studio before arriving at Tilleys, gave a powerful presentation in which he spoke on a range of issues and answered questions from the audience. Some of the points discussed were:

> The cumulative effects of funding cuts - like water dripping on a rock. Meaning, as News and Current Affairs strives to maintain existing standards and introduce new programs with a restricted budget, over time, something has to give. Staff numbers have been significantly reduced and it becomes a struggle to maintain the same depth and quality of coverage. Legitimate efficiencies have been achieved, but there are definite limits to the principle of "doing more with less" before the quality of output is affected. Since David Hill began his process of reform in the ABC in the late eighties, staff numbers have been cut from



more than 7,000 to just over 4,000. ABC staff are in a bind - they try harder and harder to produce high quality programs with fewer human resources, but their success in doing that masks the reality of the situation; robbing Peter to pay Paul can't go on indefinitely. Something has to give. No one wants to cut programs, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid that option. Unfortunately, until that happens, many ABC viewers won't fully appreciate the seriousness of the funding situation. The ABC, of course, is much more than News and Current Affairs although NewsCaff is very much a part of its heart and soul. It can be likened to a tree with many branches - if you cut off too many branches the tree dies. Other areas of the ABC have also continued to suffer from the budget cuts of the past few years, but the public is not always aware of the extent of this. None of this denies the need for the ABC to continue to look for more efficient ways to operate without jeopardising the quality of product. But the ABC is already a very efficient broadcaster. Considering the range of services it produces across radio and television from one end of the country to the other, providing unequalled international, national, metropolitan and regional, its cost to operate compares more than favourably with any of its commercial counterparts.

> The proliferation of spin doctors/public relations people whose job it is to deliberately obfuscate/dumb down/confuse. This has been a very important development in recent years. It is the responsibility of the professional interviewer to try to draw out the reality of a given situation, but this can be very difficult if the politician being interviewed wants to avoid the substance of

awkward questions. The highest number of times Kerry has asked a politician the same question without getting a proper answer, is 5, but this is well short of the record of 15 by a BBC interviewer, Jeremy Paxman who is very persistent indeed!

> Most politicians genuinely want to contribute to the public good, but the constraints they are put under once they become MPs can have a stifling effect on the way they respond to questions. Politicians are elected to parliament then get caught up in the party machine - their capacity to be open with the public and journalists is controlled and limited. Too many politicians come to a political interview, determined only to get their set message across, rather than to answer all the questions.

> Good journalism requires integrity, honesty and a willingness to seek the underlying facts in a given situation, notwithstanding that interviewees may not want to discuss those facts openly.

> Claims of bias against the ABC are not justified. Of course, like any other media organisation, mistakes are occasionally made, but these are rare, and certainly not related to any cultural mindset, as has been claimed by some critics. The ABC is probably the most continuously and intensively audited organisation in Australia, yet it has been shown to be balanced and professional in the performance of its staff and as an organisation. Surveys have shown that 95% of respondents see ABC news as having their respect for reliability. 7.30 Report 89%. Overall the survey showed the ABC as having the respect of 79% of respondents. These are figures that commercial TV, radio and print media would give a great deal to have themselves.

> ABC staff are an incredibly professional and dedicated group of people, and Kerry regards it as a great privilege to have been able to work with them for many years. Kerry has worked in commercial TV, in the print media and as a press officer in the political sphere but has not worked with any group that compares with ABC staff, who do a remarkable job with extremely limited resources.

> Finally, Kerry expressed his appreciation of the fine work that the Friends of the ABC have done over the years. He advised that ABC staff find Friends' support invaluable. ■

John Ley

## The proposed FTA with the USA and the GATS - Danger for our Culture and Broadcasting

Proposed FTA: Negotiations have begun with the USA for a 'free trade' agreement. The proposal was initiated by the Coalition Government after the Bush Administration came to power and was given impetus after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington and the Australian-supported, US led, military action in Afghanistan. A team of at least 40 US negotiators have recently been in Canberra for the negotiations.

Although the Government says its highest priority is to obtain better access to the US market for agricultural and industrial products such as steel, Chief US negotiator Robert Zoellick has listed a number of matters on which the US wants major change from Australia. These give cause for concern in relation to public broadcasting and Australia's cultural diversity and heritage, especially as there is little information available yet about its negotiating position in these areas.

As well as identifying the Foreign Investment Review Board, Australia's quarantine system and seeking a weakening of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme so that US based pharmaceutical companies can obtain higher prices for their products, the US wants greater trade access in services, including telecommunications, and is focussing on intellectual property rights here, including some concerning 'performance'.

The Friends of the ABC branches throughout Australia are concerned about the possibility of the Australian Government making concessions to the US in ways that would impact adversely, directly or indirectly, on the ability of the ABC to continue to broadcast a wide range of Australian programs reflecting our own culture and identity - on television, radio and on-line.

We have therefore made a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) expressing our concerns and seeking to have the ABC's freedom to broadcast as it does now, protected. The submission (see our website) also seeks protection for local content requirements in commercial broadcasting in Australia. We are making a similar submission to the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade which is inquiring into the issues involved in the FTA.

The GATS: Concurrently with the free trade negotiations with the USA work is being done behind closed doors by DFAT concerning Australia's negotiating position on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) which was negotiated by the members of the WTO and took effect in 1995. It is extremely wide-ranging and has the potential to have a considerable impact on many services that we depend on, including public services such as education, health, water supply and communications.

Each WTO member has undertaken to list in a national schedule those services for which it wishes to guarantee access to foreign suppliers. All commitments apply equally to all other member countries, and are enforceable through the WTO tribunal system which can order payments of compensation to foreign companies aggrieved by actions of the Australian government or Australian firms. Very little detailed information has been made available by the Government to the public, to date, particularly concerning the services in respect of which other countries are seeking greater access to the Australian market..

Whilst there are advantages in some areas of Australia's trade in services in liberalising access to foreign companies, the Friends branches are concerned about decisions that the Federal Government might make that would adversely affect broadcasting and cultural areas relevant to the ABC's charter-based programs and operations. We are therefore expressing in our submission to the Senate Committee, which is simultaneously considering the GATS negotiations as well as the FTA, our concerns about the need to protect Australia's cultural diversity and identity in all areas relating to broadcasting, particularly public broadcasting. A copy of the submission will be on our website early in April. ■

John Ley

The ACT branch of FABC will continue to send the paper version to all members without email addresses and to those WITH email addresses who request it. However, due to financial considerations, other members who have provided email addresses will not receive a paper copy but will be notified by email when the newsletter is available on the website.



Please notify Janny Corry our membership secretary on [barada@ozemail.com](mailto:barada@ozemail.com) if this arrangement is not suitable and you would prefer to continue to receive a hard copy.



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APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP or RENEWAL

Please complete and return this form to the address above.

I wish to become a member [ ] or I wish to renew my membership [ ]

Enclosed is [ ] \$ 25.00 or [ ] \$15.00 Concession

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If you have e-mail would you like to receive our quarterly newsletter via e-mail or would you prefer the newsletter posted to you? E-mail [ ] Posted [ ]

I can assist with the following activities

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[ ] Letterbox drops

Can you offer any special skills eg useful contacts, writing experience etc?

.....

(Office Use Only) Member No. Valid to .....

The Friends of the ABC is a national community organisation that supports the ABC as an independent, comprehensive and innovative public broadcaster.

Further information: 6251 1880 or visit the Friends website at www.fabc.org.au