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The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP

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30 November 2014

RE: 'The Lewis Review', funding cuts to the ABC, and measures announced at the ABC

Dear Mr Spigelman, Mr Scott and Minister Turnbull

I am writing as a lifelong ABC 1 viewer and long time RN listener, member of ABC Friends (ACT) and unsuccessful applicant for membership of the ABC Advisory Council. I am also a viewer of SBS and have participated in Save our SBS campaigns (particularly concerning the introduction of commercials and decision to not broadcast Vietnamese news).

I wish to express my deep concern about the attack on public broadcasting. I consider public broadcasting is, surprise surprise, a public service. I also believe it is a necessary alternative to commercial broadcasting which does not seek to serve the nation or public good, but to make profit for shareholders. The ABC provides some balance against vested interests and those with agendas and ideologies in the commercial sector.

The long voiced accusations from some quarters that the ABC is biased or tending to 'left' or 'progressive' on the political spectrum miss (or choose to ignore) the fact that the commercial broadcasters are frequently biased (and 'right' on the political spectrum). The critics also fail to acknowledge that a core role/remit of an independent public broadcaster is to question the status quo and hold the powerful, whether government or corporate or lobby groups, to account.

While each Australian is a 'shareholder' in the ABC, I think you will find that those who watch ABC do not expect monetary gain, but rather: mental and emotional enrichment and inspiration; quality and innovative entertainment; professional, rigorous, independent, investigative news and current affairs; varied information and insights on the world around us – local, national, regional, global; nuanced coverage of diversity and complex issues and broadening our horizons; independence from government and commercial/corporate interests...and the list goes on. The ABC and SBS strengthen our democracy.

I am totally opposed to the cuts to the ABC. I acknowledge the need to operate effectively, professionally, to deliver 'value for money' and remove wastage. However, as a public broadcaster I do not think the ABC has the same 'efficiency' imperatives as a commercial profit making operation. The same goes for public transport. This is evidently my 'ideological' stance. Where savings can be made, they should be kept and invested back into the institution to deliver even better programming, coverage and services, including production of new programmes, improvements to the quality of those delivered, and a reduction in the need for repeats.

I did not vote for the Government to cut the ABC budget. These cuts appear ideologically driven, along with much of the May Budget. The budgetary cuts go beyond seeking 'efficiency dividends' and the announced changes by the ABC certainly prove this.

Given the ABC is funded by the taxpayer, the public should be privy to the findings of 'The Lewis Review'. I understand that finally the Minister for Communications will be releasing the report in the coming week (convenient timing in the pre Xmas rush or a reaction to the outpouring of criticism directed at both the Government and the ABC?).

I firmly consider that the Review should have been released by the Government prior to any budget cuts being decided, in order to allow comment and debate and feedback in the public domain, and for the ABC to respond as part of the debate. I also feel that the ABC should not have made any firm decisions prior to either the Lewis Review being presented to Parliament or the Government's budget cut announcement.

The ABC appears to have been taking 'pre-emptive' action and presenting a 'fait accompli', but I am not sure to what end - who did it serve - why has the Board not come out fighting? Mr Scott appears to have been able to dictate the future direction of the ABC under the cover of budget cuts, conveniently getting away with major changes without open debate and genuine consultation. There seems to have been a lack of transparency all round.

I have the following more specific concerns about the changes to the ABC proposed as a result of/in anticipation of/as a consequence of the budget cuts:

1. To what extent was the ABC Advisory Council involved in deliberations on how the cuts would fall in the ABC?

I may be mistaken, however the ABC Advisory Council appears to be 'missing in action'. What role did it play, if any, in advising the Managing Director and Board on the proposed changes to ABC programming? If it had a role, what were its recommendations?

2. Is the ABC beginning to suffer from 'ageism' in determining its priorities?

In interviews on RN following the announced changes to the ABC, Mr Scott stated that he saw the cuts as an opportunity to position the ABC for the future. It is well and good to refresh and reprioritise in light of changes in society and technology and 'the media landscape'. However I feel there is an obsession with online and digital that leaves out segments of the viewership and hints of 'ageism', something affecting Australian society as a whole. That is, the elderly are ignored, discounted, undervalued, disadvantaged. The same can be said for the less well off/poor.

Here I have some questions:

- Have ABC2 or 3 suffered significant cuts; it seems all cuts are concerning the 'adult' stations and programmes (RN, ABC 1, Classic FM, news and current affairs...)?
- How about consideration of those who work all day on the computer and do not wish to utilise computers or mobile devices outside of work? There remains a group of people who

still value escaping from ‘the devices’ (and still appreciate printed newspapers and real books)

- How about farmers and rural and regional Australians, the elderly, the poor, who do not have mobile devices or are not ‘in range’ or are not IT savvy and simply want to turn on the radio or TV?
- Why are panel shows proliferating and which demographic are they appealing to? I guess they are relatively cheap to produce, however they can be banal and egotistical in nature and not funny for the viewer (though those involved can have a good time). They appear to be little more than fillers. I suspect that the Chaser’s latest Media Circus is a response to a reduced budget that prevents them doing the more challenging shows of past (and infinitely more entertaining)? The saturation programming of QI is, I feel, unacceptable.
- Why are comments by ‘identities’ on social media being incorporated in news bulletins; is this really news? I sense that news has been ‘dumbing down’ and becoming superficial/shallow in recent years.

3. What about the rural/urban divide?

I am aware that a new Regional Division is proposed so it seems there is continued commitment to regional Australia and helping bridge the divide between regional/rural and urban audiences. However, I, as an avid RN listener and resident of both the ACT and the Snowy Mountains, recognise the value of (and enjoy listening to) Bush Telegraph and cannot understand why it would be scrapped while other programmes remain. I appreciate that it is impossible to please everyone, however this is about more than personal taste. There is no reason why Bush Telegraph could not be taken on by the new Regional Division (along with Landline, elements of First Bite etc).

4. News and current affairs and foreign bureaus

One ACT based commentator has noted that the public broadcaster should deliver what the commercial broadcasters do not. This includes quality news and current affairs.

Scaling back the ABCs network of foreign correspondents and concentrating them in fewer bureaus appears illogical and retrograde. This move certainly does not fit with a globalised world and the proclaimed ‘Asian Century’.

It also does not help in the current climate of fear of the ‘other’ to be reducing international staff and coverage. Australia is physically isolated and this has seeped into our psyche and obsession with ‘boat people’. We need to be exposed to the rest of the world (and share our stories) to foster a more open, culturally and diplomatically knowledgeable, informed, intelligent Australia. This will help counter (reduce) xenophobia and racism and demonization of the ‘other’ including those who come to our shores seeking refuge. It is understandable that foreign bureau and overseas reporting are costly – but that is a costly reality that should be borne for the good of the nation and our international reputation.

I am pleased to read that a Beirut bureau is to be opened. However what is the situation with the sub-continent? I have heard no mention of India, the world’s largest democracy. And with the cancelling of the Australia Network contract how do we ‘restore’ ABC’s coverage of the Pacific? Given the number of Vietnamese Australians, why do we rarely hear anything from Vietnam? There was a bureau there in the 1990s.

I am concerned that foreign correspondents will be operating solo. This appears foolhardy and risky in terms of safety, let alone in terms of how it will impact on rigour, quality and type of stories and coverage. Local ‘fixers’ and local staff are surely critical, while journalists with intimate/long

standing knowledge of the countries and regions they cover have significant advantage over those that 'fly in fly out'.

I understand that Foreign Correspondent is losing producers and the number of shows will be reduced and ABC's prime investigative programme, Four Corners has suffered significant cuts. Sad days.

Other worries I have are with the reduction of radio news bulletins to five minutes during the day. Will these five minutes comprise only sport, will they be little more than headlines? Which level of news – international, regional, national or local - will miss out?

I am somewhat ambivalent about ABC News Radio and ABC News 24, given the repetition involved; I tend to listen when I have missed news or other programmes elsewhere on ABC. Retention of these and a focus on the latest breaking story should not be at the expense of in-depth, investigative news elsewhere.

Following on from this, I am troubled by the axing of the state and territory 7.30 programmes and the consequent reduction in coverage of local stories and affairs. There are many examples of interesting, informative, important local stories that also help build a sense of place and community. For example, last Friday night 7.30 ACT covered the ACT Government's Through Care Programme which is being implemented to help prisoners adjust after exiting prison and hence reduce recidivism and the costs to the ACT and broader society. Friday night is always a difficult time in terms of 'ratings' or viewer numbers, but ABC is not solely about ratings, it is also about public service.

5. Maintaining internal capacity, institutional knowledge and 'wisdom'

Does the ABC really want to shed all internal production capacity? And thus become totally dependent on outsourcing or procurement? Does this really save money in the long term and what about the synergies/advantages of having the Adelaide studio located near the South Australian Film Corporation?

I am disturbed that the national public broadcaster is going to lose some of the nation's best journalists; those with extensive knowledge of subject matter as well as years of experience and honed skills. This list includes people such as Sean Dorney, Quentin Dempster, Jim Middleton, Greg Wilesmith. Again, I fear an undervaluing of 'wisdom', 'experience', 'intellect' and in-depth story telling and investigation, and detect potential 'ageism' bias. I do not think the 'digital skills' or 'new media' skills should be the dominant criteria by which such experienced journalists keep or lose their jobs.

Is the ABC still regarded as one of the best broadcasters in the world with a team of talent and expertise? Does it aspire to be the best?

An anecdote – in one Commonwealth Department this year there was an afternoon tea for those staff leaving due to budget cuts – it was calculated that over 900 years of experience was walking out the door. Loss of institutional knowledge and experience weakens an organisation. Value equally the 'old' and the 'young'.

6. Quality and intellectually stimulating content, and the role of the 'back room'

Following on from the above point, with the emphasis on digital and online, how will this not come at the expense of quality TV and radio programmes and services?

How is the ABC going to continue, protect and foster specialised, in-depth, intelligent, intellectually stimulating programming and content? I am very concerned about the potential 'dumbing down' of

the ABC when it should be playing a key role in educating and 'lifting up' the audience in the context of growing, increasingly complex challenges to our economy and society and the need to transform into a knowledge and low carbon economy and society. This is not elitism.

Cuts to back room or support services 'do not necessarily quality programming make.' In other words, cutting 'behind the scenes' can impact on what is delivered to the audience. I have noticed this with the loss of editorial staff and others in the print media domain.

7. Savings suggestions

One suggestion put forth by an ACT commentator that I would support is a reduction in ABC coverage of mainstream sport – which is fully covered by the commercial stations - and a focus on the sport that gets short shrift or is not covered – primarily women's sport.

I would suggest that the ABC reduces TV advertising – there is a constant doubling up of announcements of about-to-be-aired programmes; this is annoying and unnecessary.

I also question the profitability and costs of running ABC Shops – there has been no mention of them in the cuts/changes. What role do they play in shoring up the ABC budget?

To the Minister I humbly suggest that there are many ways to increase revenue and reduce spending across the board that could have prevented the need to target the ABC. These include:

- rethinking spending \$12 billion on 58 Joint Strike fighter jets that remain highly controversial and 'unproven' and not necessarily useful in fighting the new battles or dealing with future crises (terrorism, climate change induced catastrophes, epidemics)
- rethinking our commitment to the fight against ISIS in Iraq (an open tap it seems and a decision that should have been debated and put to a vote in Parliament)
- reversing the Direct Action policy that will be paying polluters for voluntary emissions cuts and reinstating a price on carbon
- moving to rapidly fix loopholes in the tax system that sees Australia lose revenue from multi-national corporations, and cease giving tax rebates to media corporations
- reinstating, strengthening and widening the Mining Tax to cover all our non-renewable resources (once gone they will not be there to tax and we will have put nothing in the piggy bank!)
- ceasing the costly (in more ways than one) incarceration of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island, PNG and the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders and processing asylum seekers on Australian soil.

In addressing you I am also representing the views and sentiments of my parents, Ann and Cees Koeman.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Annalisa Koeman

Copied to:

- The Hon. Jason Clare MP, Opposition Spokesperson for Communications
- Senator Scott Ludlam, Greens Spokesperson for Communications
- Senator Nick Xenophon, Independent Senator for South Australia
- Senator Zed Seselja, Liberal Senator for the ACT
- Senator Kate Lundy, Labor Senator for the ACT
- The Hon. Ms Gai Brodtmann MP, Labor Member for Canberra
- The Hon. Dr Andrew Leigh MP, Labor Member for Fraser
- Joan McKain, Convenor, ABC Advisory Council
- Glenys Stradijot, ABC Friends National Spokesperson
- Catherine Henderson, ABC Friends ACT