

update

Friends of the ABC (NSW) Inc.
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incorporating
background briefing
national magazine

friends of the abc



The Vanished 68

Senator Alston's '68 bias charges' evaporated. Several came from a Liberal party official, half-a-dozen from telephone calls to Alston's office, which doesn't keep phone call records and 'frivolous' applied to many of the rest. Only 17 survived, fairly marginal calls. (see page 10).

The episode is a lesson. A reader remarked recently that *Update* seemed rather negative

'Negative' isn't the right word; perhaps testy or critical fits. That tone is pretty well inescapable. We concentrate on what's at stake, what's potentially wrong, implications that are ominous, decisions that are threatening and policies that are plain wrong; the sum of which constitute attacks on the ABC and on us, its audiences.

Justice Kirby in England last month, speaking about the Law, said this: "politicians or polemicists of different stripe...these bully boys (and girls) are contemptuous of fundamental human rights and jealous of any source of power apart from their own." Similar interest groups prey on the ABC.

From that perspective the ABC needs the support of Friends and *Update*, modest as they may be, helping guard the gates against the barbarians - even when some might think threats and pressure have subsided. They haven't.

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News a Political Prisoner - the missing "Middle Ground"

Walter Hamilton, ABC Head of National Coverage - News and Current Affairs, was guest speaker at the NSW FABC annual general meeting. He drew on overviews of the contest between journalism and 'patriotism'.

He first compared the 'Minow Overview' with that of Rupert Murdoch, described in "The Age of Murdoch" by James Fallows.*

Newton Minow was the chairman of the US Federal Communication's Commission in 1961 who declared "I am here to uphold and protect the public interest. Some say the public interest is merely what interests the public. I disagree."

Walter contrasted the Minow view that the business of news is different from other businesses with "a unique responsibility to serve the public interest" with Rupert Murdoch's assertion that "the news

business is basically the same as other business."

One Congressman responded: "Then how do you explain the imbalance between 300-plus hours of nationally syndicated conservative talk, against 5 hours of liberal talk?"

Murdoch: "Apparently conservative talk is more popular."

Unbiased?

In a Congressional hearing, Murdoch had argued: "My news organisation always strives to be 'fair and balanced'."

James Fallows, Walter Hamilton pointed out, notes that the idea that press responsibility begins and ends with attracting a market has historical precedents.

Continued on Page 14

Northern Rivers Branch End of Year Report



In March we had a visit by Greg Wilesmith talking about "The Role of the Foreign Correspondent in an Age of Uncertainty".

Fiona Martin outlined the production of the "Reimagining Utopia" program broadcast on Radio National and supported by a fascinating web site.

In partnership with Screenworks we held a Film Screening at Byron Bay and a panel session looking at the potential impact of Free Trade Agreements on the Australian audio visual industries.

At the Lismore car Boot Market, we raised some funds and collected hundreds of signatures for a petition.

Aunt's (totaly unbiased) Arty Party at Byron Bay was another great success.



The final event for the year is
A
Jazz Luncheon
at the
Palms Restaurant,
Hastings Point
Sunday, 14 December
at 12.30

Our branch web site provides further details on these activities at: <http://home.iprimus.com.au/webformation/friendsabcnr>

We sent a petition to the Senate and House of Representatives calling on the Federal Government to:

- i. ensure the independence of the ABC Board;
- ii. provide an immediate increase in funding to the ABC to help make the transition to digital technology without undermining existing programs,
- iii. support ABC journalists when they are charged with unsubstantiated claims of political bias;
- iv. provide the ABC with sufficient funds to produce high quality Australian drama;
- v. ensure that the Australian Film and Television industry is fully protected during negotiations over Free Trade Agreement.

Neville Jennings

Join Illawarra Friends At Kiama Seaside Markets Sunday, 21 December

This is one of the best located markets in NSW - right beside Kiama Harbour.

The Friends have a stall arranged and we are seeking volunteers to assist us.

If you can spare a couple of hours on the day, please call Chris on (02) 4226 2323 or email: chris@telledge.com.au

In any event, come along - we have some great Friends merchandise for Christmas gifts.

Port Macquarie's Street Successes

Port Macquarie Friends Branch is currently planning and promoting another Friends street stall on Thursday 11th December (in Horton Street, outside the National Bank.)

Drusi Megget says branch members are always energetic in rallying around its street stalls.

"The public's always supportive." Drusi said, "and a great source of comment - how wonderful ABC programs are, how good kids TV is, how only ABC news is worth watching, and so on."

There'll be a
Branch Christmas Party on
Sunday 30th December and
Port's
next General Meeting
on Saturday 7th February,
10 am - Noon,
at the
Meeting Room,
Port Macquarie Library

Good News of Friends
Stalwart Nancy Short

"Last time I talked to Nancy she sounded much better and much like her old self. She is staying with her daughter Pen in Brisbane at the moment. Nancy may be back in Port around Xmas but it is doubtful whether she will be here to stay ever again. Her older daughter Jen, who used to live with her in Port Macquarie, has health problems herself and is in Sydney for medical treatment."

Drusi Megget

A Bonus for Friends from Phil Somerville

Update's regular pro-bono cartoonist, Phil Somerville, has self-published a calendar of cartoons. His **2004 Bicycle Cartoon Calendar** tackles a variety of themes, but all linked by the humble bicycle - from ecology and world conspiracy to urban development, traffic and post-Iraq...witty and humane.

No Friends household should be without one!

The calendar is printed on A3 quality art stock, in black and white with plenty of room for 'jotting space'.

Contact Phil at (02) 4759 2078. or: pipsomervill@hermes.net.au or c/- 3 Fairview Rd, Lawson NSW 2783.

Cost - \$16.50 (incl gst) per calendar plus \$3.50 post/packaging, cheque or postal order in his name only.

No FABC branch should be without one!



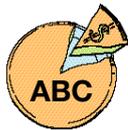
The President's Report

I recently wrote to the new minister for Communications, Information

Technology and The Arts, Daryl Williams, congratulating him on his appointment. We can anticipate a less confrontational relationship between the minister and the ABC. This does not necessarily translate into additional, much needed funds for the ABC. We intend to meet with the new minister at the earliest opportunity to put forward our position on funding and other important principles, including Board appointments and editorial independence, and also to hear from him his approach to the role and his attitude to the ABC.

The outgoing minister, Senator Richard Alston, made "ABC bashing" into an art form. He had occupied the portfolio since this government came to power and was the shadow minister for a period prior to that. By any measurement, Senator Alston's term as minister of almost seven years should be regarded as a complete failure.

At the outset, \$66 million was carved out of the ABC budget – a blow from which the ABC has not recovered. Senator Alston has not supported the many ABC submissions for a restoration of lost funding. He has presided over the digital television debacle and, but for the senate, would have relaxed Australia's media ownership laws even further to the benefit of the big media moguls.



Although he is no longer the minister, Senator Alston is still pursuing the establishment of an additional body to review complaints against the ABC. The ABC is subject to more scrutiny than any other public instrumentality, and yet, because the former minister did not receive support for his allegations of anti-US bias, he wants to create another tribunal to sit in judgement of the ABC.



Unwittingly, Senator Alston proved to be of great value to the Friends of the ABC. No sooner had he launched his mid year attacks on the ABC than our membership was boosted by several hundred new members.

Senator Alston's baton has been taken up by Senator Santo Santoro, a little known Liberal Senator from Queensland who is attempting to curry favour with his political masters by "out-Alstoning" the former minister. In one outrageous comment he described himself as a "true friend of the ABC", an insult to our many members throughout Australia.

A few weeks ago the Frankston East branch of the Liberal Party voted to take a motion to the Victorian State Conference proposing that the federal government sell the ABC and apply the funds to fight salination. Their rationale? – "the ABC duplicates the output of commercial broadcasters". From under which rock did these cretins crawl?

Our Annual General Meeting was held on 25 October. It is appropriate to thank retiring committee members, Jenny Forster, George Wardell and Eric Hitchen for their efforts on your behalf and to welcome new committee members, Janet Simpson, Lenore Kulakauskas and Mal Hewitt. The meeting unanimously passed a number of special resolutions amending our constitution, the most notable amongst them being the inclusion of definitions of "branch", "sub-branch" and "associate member", and the amendment which will overcome difficulties branches have experienced in accessing members' contact details.

Eastern Suburbs Branch Re-launched

It is pleasing to report that the Eastern Suburbs branch was re-launched to an overflow audience at Bondi Junction on 28 September. An enthusiastic and active committee is in place. Contact details are on the back page of *Update*.

Last month we participated in the Newtown Festival for the fifth successive year and enjoyed by far our most successful year, with almost \$1500 in merchandise sales, selling out some lines and gaining new members. Thanks are due to the many volunteers who helped on the day."

"Our identity is not for sale"

The next, and possibly final round of negotiations for the Free Trade Agreement between Australia and the United States takes place early in December in Washington. The government recently revealed that it is prepared to negotiate Australian film and television local content laws in exchange for "a good deal on agriculture". It appears that the government will offer the Americans concessions on "new media" (digital television, video-on-demand, mobile telephony and other on-line entertainment services). In five, ten or twenty years time, "new media" might be dominant in our audio-visual industry and Australian identity and culture will be subsumed by American junk culture. It now seems unlikely that negotiations will conclude this year with contingency plans being prepared for further talks in January. Let us not accept Trade Minister Mark Vaile's assurance that "the local industry should wait for the outcome of the negotiations" - by then it will be too late. Write to the Prime Minister and Minister Vaile and protest at the government's plans. Remember - "our identity is not for sale".

On behalf of the committee, I extend our best wishes to you and your families for the festive season and a fervent new year wish for improved funding for the ABC.

Gary Cook,
President

Membership Expands on Busy Central Coast

Branch involvement this year extended also to Sydney and Canberra

With ABC Local Radio about to open on the Central Coast at Gosford, in the space of three months from July the local Friends' branch signed up more than 20 new members

They also attended the September 14 rally in the domain and were suitably impressed by the compere, Julie McCrossin, and the 'speakers gallery'.



Julie McCrossin

They also attended a meeting in the Studio at the Opera House to hear some compelling arguments from actors and writers concerned that Australian culture was being traded away in the current Free Trade Agreement discussions. There was standing room only in the Studio which holds in excess of 300.

Two members also travelled to Canberra to take part in a rally at Parliament House expressing similar concerns that the Australian Government may trade off some of our long-held legacies to rush into a Free Trade agreement with the USA, changing so much that we value in this country.

At stake are the Pharmaceutical Benefits scheme, our strict quarantine regulations, the Australian content requirements in broadcasting and film, media ownership rules, and the powers of the Investment Review Board.

The Central Coast end of year function was held at the Central Coast Leagues Club on Sunday November 30 and one of the performers at the function was Clay Shearan, one of the singers at the Friends' rally in the domain.

Our Annual General meeting will be at the Central Coast Leagues Club, Gosford, on Saturday February 14.

Eastern Suburbs Friends Re-Activate



At inauguration of new Eastern Suburbs Branch. L to R. Nizza Siano, Secretary, Quentin Dempster, Tina Bursill, Max Siano

A new Eastern Suburbs Branch emerged in September from an audience of 120 people at an *ABC in Crises* forum, chaired by Tina Burfill.

Quentin Dempster discussed the ABC's loss of funding. Louise Southalan of AFTINET warned the forum of the potential dangers the US FTA presents to Australia's culture and local content.



Members of the new Eastern Suburbs Branch celebrate inauguration with Quentin Dempster and Gary Cook.

Cameron Murphy stressed the ABC's role in protecting civil liberties by presenting a plurality of views and the forum committed itself wholeheartedly to setting up a new Friends branch.

Bathurst Friends Delivered a Warm Welcome

A year which included a very successful evening of poetry and song during "An Irish Night in the Pub" in Bathurst on Bloomsday eve wound up with an end-of-year meeting and Christmas Party in the Regional Art Gallery. The warmest of welcomes was for the guest speaker, the 7.30 Report's Kerry O'Brien.

The Irish night which played to a full house was followed by a well-patronised FABC stall in one of Bathurst's major shopping malls at the end of October which raised several hundred dollars from the sale of merchandise and a raffle.

And there was no shortage of Friends and supporters stopping by to sign letters to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the new Minister for Communications stressing the ABC's vital role across the nation and expressing the writers' concerns about Government policy towards the national broadcaster.

Norah Taylor

Great Lakes Friends

organised a public meeting for Sunday, 30 November, where Robyn Williams of Radio National's *Science Show* was guest speaker.

Details - next issue.

Another Victory For the ABC's Trophy Cupboard

Health Matters

ABC Online's Health Matters website - wins the Online category in the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) Awards.

The awards recognise excellence in media reporting of public issues.

The Health Matters website was launched last year and is designed to provide up-to-date, accessible and accurate health information. The site features a range of health information, including health news and features, fact files, health ethics and policy, regional health information and an events diary, as well as medical research and personal stories.

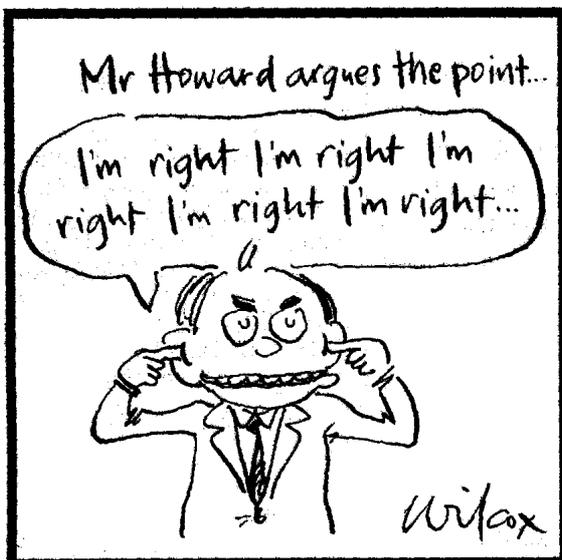
ABC New Media and Digital Services Executive Producer, Ian Allen, accepted the award in Brisbane at the PHAA's 35th annual conference.

We created the Health Matters site because we believed the ABC was in a unique position to offer accessible, credible and independent information about health," Mr Allen said.

"So we're thrilled to have our work recognised by the Public Health Association. I'd also like to thank the ABC's Development division because without their support this new health initiative would not have been possible."

The ABC Online team responsible for the Health Matters website are Ian Allen, Producers Rae Fry and Danny Kingsley, Journalist Dr Peter Lavelle, Information Architect Moira Hogan, Graphic Designer Kim Hamilton and Web Developer Tristan Gross

The site is at:
www.abc.net.au/health



Democracy - It's As Simple As ABC

ACT and regional FABC President, Margaret O'Connor, contributes a guest column for Update making a connection between Richard Alston's 68 complaints and a violent anti-ABC editorial in the Australian that preceded it.

With serendipity too convenient for coincidence, the editorial heralded a trying time for the broadcaster. Attacks came from everywhere, including the Senate Estimates hearings where Max Uechtritz was under fire, culminating in Alston's 68-claim.

Politicians frequently throw these things out to see if they grab hold of the public consciousness. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Thankfully this time the mud didn't stick. The public rallied around. Letters to the Editor and public opinion pieces dripped disdain. Public support for the ABC was confirmed yet again. But it's frankly daunting that the Broadcaster has such powerful political and commercial critics.

Friends Battle

Most people who work in Friends of the ABC hold down day jobs and have family responsibilities. We can't afford teams of bland and terrifying public relations consultants. We lick the stamps and fold our newsletters ourselves. Nonetheless we have proved ourselves by no means ineffectual.

But let's give the News Limited attacks perspective.

Another fine public broadcaster, the BBC - itself in the news a lot recently - has also come in for a share of bullying by a certain media mogul.

The BBC's supposed sins include waste, mismanagement and dull programming (sound familiar?) and the worst sin of all - an expansion into multi-channel TV in direct competition with Murdoch's sky channel.

Rupert's "Empire"

BBC journalists wrote to The Observer: "It is wrong for the Murdoch group to try to talk the government into getting rid of Sky's only competitor in the UK. We believe many people would be appalled if the BBC were penalised simply because it was competing too well with Rupert Murdoch's media empire."

So that's what it was all about - simple commercial greed. When factually inaccurate, misleading and vitriolic attacks on the ABC appear in News Limited publications in Australia, we should remember Murdoch's campaign against the BBC in the UK.



Despite the harshest fiscal, commercial, political and ideological attacks on it in the broadcaster's history, the ABC has been sustained by its credibility with the public, its deserved popularity and heroic ABC staff.

But no doubt such attacks will continue on many different fronts and we'll keep speaking out against them when and where we can. Public broadcasting is about a little bit more than commercial or political imperatives.

(An edited version of an article Margaret contributed to the ACT Teacher.)

The People Rally to Protect and Preserve the ABC

If the FABC rally in the Domain on 14th September could have done with a few more in the crowd, it lacked for absolutely nothing in passion and celebrities! Brian Davies reports:

We were there to hit back at Alston, rebuff people like Gerard Henderson and Piers Ackerman and highlight the Government's budgeting parsimony and the ABC's crisis of cuts.

We teamed up with the Teachers Federation and the P & C Association, booked the Domain, audio and staging and ran off several thousand flyers we distributed at railway stations.

So who spoke? Richard Glover, Julie McCrossin (chairing), John Derum, Margaret Pomeranz, John Hewson, David Barr (Ind. MLA for Manly) did - among others. What did they say?

Richard Glover:

"A recent News Poll showed that 89 % of people think the ABC does a good job.



"We're not obsessed with ratings, but of course we watch them and what they show is that the community's hungry for the sort of product the ABC produces at the moment, in the world we live in.

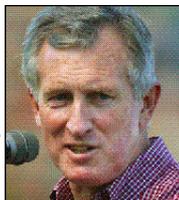
"We don't need Alan Jones making mountains out of mole hills; we've got real mountains to deal with - that's what the ABC stands for at the moment and that's what audiences want.

"So I ask you a question: why would the Government - and Alston - attack the ABC as he is doing; why does Labor attack the ABC when they're in government - why attack an organization with 89% support of the community. It doesn't make sense. There're no votes in attacking the ABC. Why do they do it? To intimidate us - to un-nerve us from asking the right questions

But - the staff at ABC will not be intimidated and we can't be intimidated if you stand by us and stand behind us like you are today."

John Hewson:

"The most disturbing thing to me is the way media policy over the last 25 years has simply been the outcome of trying to win favours from the country's two or three media moguls.



"Under governments of both persuasions, for 25 years the ABC board has been a political football, without long-term strategies or direction.

"When I think ABC I think of three key words:

"mainstream - the ABC must maintain a mainstream position. It is the balance to privately owned media moguls.

"Independence - the judiciary and reserve bank enjoy independence - why not the ABC? Let it get on with what it does and does well.

"And the third word is 'PBS' - the poor thing public broadcasting system in the US - the last thing to be wished on the ABC."

Ramona Koval:

(The staff-elected member of the ABC board:) "There's less and less money for research, for the reference library, for training of staff, for the chance to do good investigative work



"Body blows to the infrastructure of the ABC are not only body blows to us but also body blows to the very body of our democracy.

"Aunty isn't perfect - but we can only keep going with the support of viewers and listeners and those who understand what a great loss the demise of such an organisation would be."

Margaret Pomeranz:

"I'm in despair that public broadcasting is in danger, worldwide.



"Its heading for domination of information services by very few players; it strikes me that acknowledging the independence of public broadcasting free from any form of commercial ignominy is absolutely basic to democracy.

"Sensationalism makes us scared, but we don't have to be a scared nation. We can deal with things...if we're given decent, rational, well-researched information. I think news and public affairs delivered by public broadcasters is the only thing standing between us and the barbarians at the gate.

(Referring to economic rationalism and globalisation) - "we have to fight hard to maintain what little bulwark we have against the commercialisation of everything.

"Public broadcasters are under pressure - but there has to be a place in broadcasting that allows for intelligent programming - programming that perhaps dares to make demands on audiences.

"Just look at the significant stories covered by *Four Corners* over the years - stories the commercials would never have touched.

"All this proves you can't take anything precious for granted. Maybe it's good to be reminded that you have to fight for things you value - and if we do have to fight we have to fight hard."

Bias? The ABC IS the Balance



Blue Mountains FABC Chair, actor and writer John Derum, speaking at the FABC Domain Rally in September, redressed the balance – passionately. This is what he said:

“What I have to say today is as an ABC consumer...and after today I may never be asked to work there again!

But - a lot of my work has been in regional and remote areas and everything we say today to support our ABC can be multiplied many times to understand the importance of the service the ABC provides to country people. For News and Current Affairs, Education and information, the ABC is every bit as essential to their lives as what they do is essential to ours and our big city standard of living.

I recommend you join Friends of the ABC - it's a very efficient way to add your voice where it matters. Apart from keeping in touch with what's going on, meeting other smart and considerate people just like you, it costs almost nothing and you add to the number of people the Friends can speak for.

And we need to have a strong Friends voice in order to support the program makers. The makers of ABC programs are under constant pressure from inside and outside the ABC to compromise standards, to imitate the cheap and nasties, to popularise. To play the ratings game and abandon any notion of excellence and leadership.

Countering the Enemy

We have to support them actively, so they make the best possible programs without the distraction of

getting waylaid into political arguments: arguments about survival of programs, networks and even the ABC itself, with the enemies of the very idea of a national broadcaster.

And they are enemies - these attacks on ABC have been going on for thirty years.

Every Australian Government in that time has failed us, each has failed to ensure independent finance and to ensure Board and Management appointments are free from government influence and favour.

Governments of both political persuasion have chosen to defy democratic principles and keep control - for them and their mates. They hate the ABC because they fear it, because they know that is where their policies and actions will be subjected to meaningful scrutiny.

The interference can be major - such as funding reductions and manipulation of key appointments, or apparently minor - such as vexatious complaints against AM recently from the Government and their mates.

Stay Alert

There are controversial issues of ideology and politics on our plate at the moment but none more important than this: we're here today because we're already alarmed. We must be very alert to these 21st Century book burners!

And the “dumbing down” pressure seems constant. I feel for the producers and presenters who have to deal with this stuff and yet they continue to make programs of high standard and uncompromising quality.

Let the staff make the programs for us and let us demand the protection and independence of the organisation.

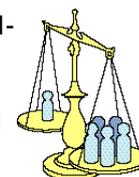
Finally, a word about balance. The bleating about “balance” comes from people who don't listen to ABC. They hear occasional bits and they want their own narrow views reinforced.

Tell 'em

We listen to the ABC because we know we will hear a great range of views, a great range of debate, the full spectrum of challenging opinions on every conceivable issue.

We listen to ABC because the ABC IS the balance.

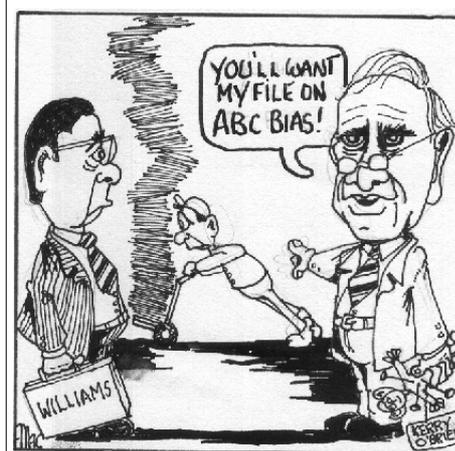
It IS the balance to the self-serving, the mindless, the bigoted and the ignorant that clutter our airwaves - electronic and conversational. The ABC IS the balance!



And we must assure the program makers and presenters that we want them to keep providing that balance. And we must remind the interfering politicians that we won't tolerate that balance being compromised.

Let's tell 'em: The ABC IS the balance!”

Become a Friend of the ABC - Join Now
Have you asked your friends, neighbours, relatives and business contacts to join the Friends of the ABC?



Balding: ABC Funding - . A loss too steep for the private sector.

The ABC's MD addressed the FABC's National Conference in Perth - lamenting past budgets and fearing the future.

Principal guest speaker at the Perth conference, Russell Balding named independence, funding, program comprehensive-ness and digital broadcasting as the main areas of concern the ABC still faced.

On independence, Mr Balding seized on Gerard Henderson's suggestion that an ABC more sympathetic to government might find funding a lot easier: this would be a threat to the ABC's editorial independence. "That has to be protected at all cost." Independence was more important than funding.

Since '85-86 there had been a 30% reduction in funding. Regardless of what method used, the figure was no less than 25%.

"No private sector corporation could survive that sort of injury."

Asked if there was a chance that the \$17.8 million a year might continue past its four year life, Mr

Balding said he thought not, and that the National Initiative program would have to be wound down.

The Price Paid

"A problem with dropping services is that things are sacrificed: the digital multi-channels were serving the future audience. Fly TV was growing in popularity and would have produced the next generation of adult ABC fans."

"It's not a case of which show should be cut, but that none should be cut. The ABC needs to be as broad as possible."

Digital Minority

On the digital revolution Mr Balding said the national broadcaster needed to be in the lead, but to do anything, the funds had to be there.

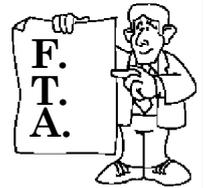
He pointed out that the government was paying the transmission cost of digital - some \$60 million per annum at its peak, and a total \$700 million all up, but this was only for transmission and nothing to do with content; yet only 100,000 people had taken up digital.



Friends Set Up A Watch On the Free Trade Talks

And is Australia's media - indeed Australian's culture in all its manifestations - a bargaining chip?

The FABC has set up a Free Trade Watch to be run by the ACT branch to monitor Australia's negotiations with the United States for a Free Trade Agreement.



The decision was taken at the national conference in Perth where Gary Cook presented a precis of his 25-page paper on the issue to launch discussion on the likely impacts of GATS and a Free Trade Agreement on public broadcasting.

The FABC's position is one of serious concern due to the broad scope of issues, a general lack of information about the negotiations, a lack of transparency; the absence of Australian parliamentary involvement; and the binding nature of the final agreement.

At issue as well was Trade Minister Mark Vaile's refusal to remove local content media provisions from the bargaining table and the anonymity surrounding discussions - who, for example, knew we had even discussed free trade treaties with Singapore and Thailand, let alone signed them.

Conference resolved that it endorsed "the creation of an FABC Free Trade Watch group composed of interested FABC members, in order to monitor and report to FABC members on progress in free trade negotiations, with particular reference to their impact on media, culture, entertainment and related matters."

Melbourne-based author, consultant and educator, John M Legge, is quite blunt about the dangers.

Not Surrendered - Just Frozen

Legge writes* that if they can't have the local content rules abolished, "the Hollywood moguls at least want them frozen to prevent them from covering subscription TV, the Internet and other new media.

To Lift Media Ownership Restrictions

"They also want media ownership restrictions lifted so that Australian TV and radio stations can be integrated into the US networks. Howard would probably welcome the chance to agree; after all, in his view the local content rules support a swag of chardonnay-swilling, latte-sipping small-L liberals.



Dissent Spring 2003. "An Australian-Free Trade Agreement - Myth and Reality"

Media Ownership Laws Only Temporarily Shelved

The vexed question of private media ownership also impacts on the ABC. The National Conference declared that domination by a few could marginalise the national broadcaster.

National Conference carried the following resolution: "that as increased domination of the Australian media by a few powerful players could readily lead to the ABC being marginalised, FABC oppose changes to media ownership laws which could lead to increased concentration of media ownership across Australia in its regions or cities or loss of Australian culture and localism."

The Senate in June rejected legislation to ease Australia's cross media ownership laws but the conference noted the bill could return to the Senate from October onward - and return as double dissolution legislation.

Conference was unanimous that media ownership had a critical impact on the ABC. It could result in what was happening to the ABC not being reported, with the FABC unable to conduct an effective public campaign. There was a risk too of more restricted content access for the ABC.

Conference agreed it was important to lobby politicians in each state, especially independents, urging them to stand firm against any weakening of the cross media ownership laws

Facts and Figures

Sensible people however are nervous of ever expanding media empires controlling the information they get.

Before the Senate defeat, Senator Alston claimed Australians were now getting their information and news "from a wider range of sources than ever" with one in two households connected to the Internet and nearly a third connected to Pay TV. "With Digital TV, there are more community broadcasters than ever," he said.

But ABA statistics suggest otherwise: only 10 percent of people use pay TV and only 11 percent the Internet.

But the proposed new cross ownership laws obviously appeal to the current owners wanting more. How would it work?

Packer-Murdoch Would Dominate News

It would allow Packer, for instance, to add the Fairfax group to his existing 9 Network and publishing kingdom and allow Murdoch to bid for the Seven and Ten networks to join his worldwide conglomerate which, as News Limited, already owns just on 70% of Australia's newspaper market.

Looking to Next Year - Going to the Polls

A draft "Proposed Paper for Political Parties" circulated for discussion at the Perth conference for further strategy inputs from branches.

The writer of the draft, Glenys Stradijot (Victoria) made the point that with 33 days the minimum notice required, 11th August, 2004, would be the last date for a double dissolution election and a general election could be any date before 4th November.

She said that the Government seemed to be hedging its bets and a double dissolution election seemed unlikely.

In fact, due to the quota system that favours small parties in a dissolution election, the Coalition could pick up more Senate seats in a normal election.

Govt. Could Change ABC Charter

The draft paper canvases as obvious the dangers of a government hostile to the ABC controlling the Senate, with the capacity to change the ABC Charter

It emphasises the need to think carefully about the

most effective way to work the ABC's interests into the campaign, while ensuring the FABC maintains its integrity to continue to be effective after the election.

Discussion of the draft paper included these points:

(Darce Cassidy) - We have to realise that even in good years, the ABC isn't usually an election issue.

(Terry Laidler) - Some Liberal supporters may not be able to bring themselves to vote Labor in protest against Coalition policies, but go instead with a minor party. These candidates should be identified and targeted, and their position regarding the ABC determined early on.



The government is poll-driven and very sensitive to public opinion, and plays directly to people's concerns.



Petty in 'Dissent' - Spring 2003

Alston's Bias Rumble Cost the ABC Dearly

FABC decides to seek financial answers to some questions of bias.

Resolved in Perth: "That this National Conference of the FABC endorses the current system of complaints handling and considers it comprehensive and exhaustive."

Terry Laidler (FABC Victoria) felt that the process of dealing with Alston's extraordinary 'American-bias' allegations against the ABC was professionally done and that it would stand up in any similar forum.

He estimated however that the exercise probably cost the ABC about \$200,000 - production money wasted, not to mention Murray Green's valuable time.

"We should be asking for an investigation of this waste of money. We should also be asking for a refund of the wasted money," he said.

As well, there was no way of knowing what the preparation of Alston's original litany of complaints had cost.

Darce Cassidy reminded the conference that he had gone to the Broadcasting Authority's site at the time and checked on complaints against the ABC; there had been none this year and the ones last year were mostly trivial matters about things like the timing of program starts.

The conference decided to organise for a question in Parliament to be asked to ascertain the time involved and the cost to the public of Senator Alston's monitoring of the ABC and the preparation and lodgement of his allegations.

Resource Centre Stays

Darce Cassidy was warmly thanked for his previous 'national' role and agreed to continue running the FABC website resource centre. Darce said the centre was intended as a repository of information, such as Gary Cook's paper on the free trade issues and Glenys Stradijot's paper on elections.

Past FABC submissions were there, also fact sheets for use by branches and members and the site included a discussion forum, with each state forming a reference group to provide advice and information as appropriate. Darce agreed to moderate the FABC Resource Centre.

Links with other groups

Roger Raven (WA) said

that for the FABC to be more effective there were times the FABC needed to join with others in common action; for example, to tie into other issues of social concern, such as health.

"But one must be aware of the politics of other groups, and keep the focus on our own aims as well," he said.

Gary Cook moved and Darce Cassidy seconded - "collaboration with other groups be encouraged where it is related to the ABC, but that it be for a specific purpose, such as the defence of the ABC charter, and be non-party-political, and of a temporary nature." Carried unanimously.



Friends at the Perth National Conference

Just how short of money is the ABC?

Tired of chasing sometimes phantom figures - depending whose they are - the FABC decides to do its own sums. Just how under-funded is our national broadcaster?

FABC is considering employing a person to undertake a comprehensive overview of ABC finances to produce a document to go with the recent McKinsey study and the current Macquarie report, so that the Friends can be reassured as to accuracy.

Darce Cassidy said there was sufficient information around for Friends to prepare our own paper on ABC finances; but a final version of the

Macquarie report was needed, which was being sought from Russell Balding. Alternatively, Terry Laidler suggested, the Macquarie report might be obtainable under Freedom Of Information.

Darce said Friends should produce a formula for ABC funding, rather than just asking for more funds without precise back-up information, with dollars labelled for outcomes. What exactly does "grossly" under-funded mean?

Conference decided Darce Cassidy should put a draft together and circulate it for comment.

One View of the Media...a Frightening One

As expressed in the Spring issue of the Australian journal 'Dissent' by one of its editors, economics writer Kenneth Davidson.



By the time of the Iraq invasion in March 2003, a New York Times/CBS News survey estimated that 42 per cent of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for the September 11 attacks and an ABC (America) News poll found that 55% of Americans believed Hussein was directly linked to Al Qaeda.

Arundhati Roy commented on these ill informed beliefs: "All of it based on insinuation, auto-suggestion and outright lies circulated by the US corporate media, otherwise known as the 'Free Press', that hollow pill on which American democracy rests. Public support in the US for the war against Iraq was founded on a multi-tiered edifice of falsehood and deceit, coordinated by the US government and faithfully amplified by the corporate media." The media did the Bush Administration's dirty work. Why?

According to BBC director, John Willis, who worked for a year as vice president in charge of national programs at WGBH in Boston, the 'swamp of political cravenness', which characterised the American coverage of the war, was intrinsic to the media's commercial structure, without the discipline imposed by a strong national public broadcaster. In a speech to the Royal Television Society in June 2003 Willis said: "The lesson from America is that, if news and public affairs are left purely to the market, it is most likely to give the government what it wants."

Willis reported: "Media consulting firm Frank Magid Associates warned that covering war protests might be harmful to a station's bottom line. Another consultant urged radio stations to make listeners "cry, salute, get cold chills!" Go for the emotions, and air the national anthem each day. Fox led the way as the military

cheerleader, apparently giving both viewers and politicians what they wanted. The success of Fox has pushed other stations to the right. There was little or no debate, America's leaders remained unchallenged and any lack of patriotism was punished with McCarthyite vigour," Willis said.

Bias or Ratings

As Willis implies, the problem of the American broadcasting media's failure to cover the issues leading up to the invasion of Iraq is far deeper than the bias of the corporate proprietors. It is unlikely they would have run such a one sided coverage of the Administration's position in the run up to the invasion if the biased coverage had led to falling ratings and advertising revenue.

The commercial broadcasting media's prime function is not even to entertain. It is to deliver consumers to advertisers in the right frame of mind to spend on the products and services advertised.



Responsibility

This function sits uncomfortably with broadcasting's social responsibility to inform and educate. But as the media consultants quoted by

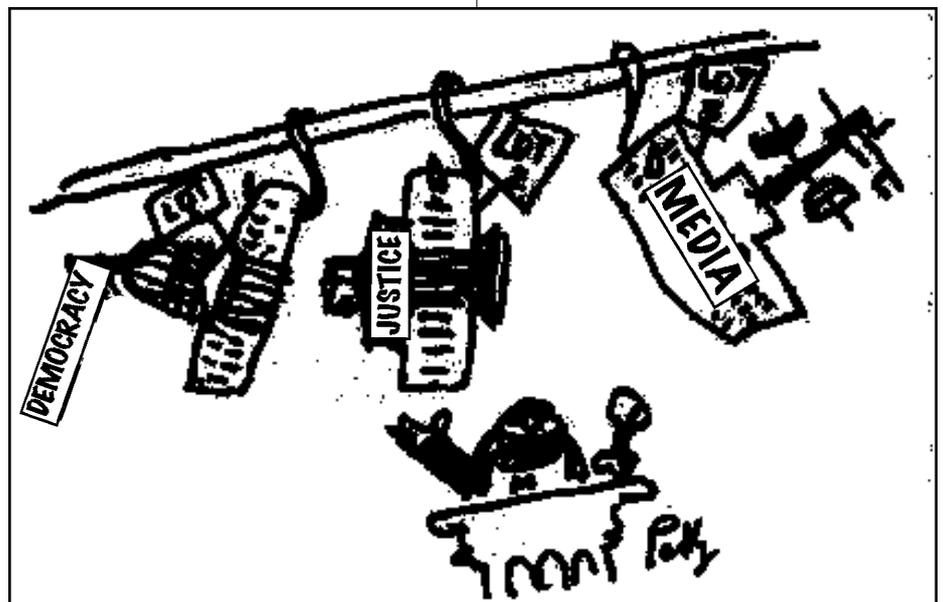
Willis make clear, the commercial and social responsibilities of the broadcast media are never so far apart as during the build up to war, especially when the government case is built on lies and half truths which should be exposed by responsible reporting.



Unfortunately, the displacement of journalistic values by commercial values in the broadcast media is likely to get worse, not better, because of the push to relax media ownership laws in Australia, Canada and the UK as well as in the US.*

*The Bush administration's plans to do so however have met a grass-roots opposition that has led the US Congress to put them on hold; see the September issue of 'Update'.

(Dissent is edited by Kenneth Davidson and Lesley Vick and published three times a year at Yarralumla, ACT.)



Petty in 'Dissent' - Spring 2003

A Window on the World without any Compromises.

"The broadcaster opens up a window on the world and for many, especially for the young, it is a window opened for the first time. If those who look out, with the eyes we have given them, see only the familiar, the comfortable, the reassuring, then surely we have failed, for the world is not like that."

"Maintain your standards, aim at the highest professionalism and technical expertise, keep your range of programming wide and try to provide everything for somebody and something for everybody, be adventurous and experimental, be bold, try always to keep one jump ahead, don't compromise with politicians or advertisers or vested interests, get the best people and give them the chance and don't be afraid to make mistakes because if you don't make mistakes you will be dull and that is the worst sin of all."

Hugh Greene, Director General of the BBC - 1960

Thanks to John Hale (Central Coast), recalling a quote from Sir Hugh Greene's biography.

One of the performers at the FABC rally in the Domain last September was a 12 year old Central Coast schoolboy, Clay Shearan. Inspired by the day he went home and wrote a little

song about the ABC. Clay and his professional entertainer Dad recorded it and the song went to air on the first day of ABC Local Radio from Gosford.. Below is an excerpt.

Imagination ABC by C & G Shearan

Imaginations running free

She's watching playschool on TV
Now she's standing like a tree
That's how I learned my ABC

Imaginations running free

Pretending things you want to be
That's how I see my ABC
Because my sisters turning three
That's how she learnt her ABC

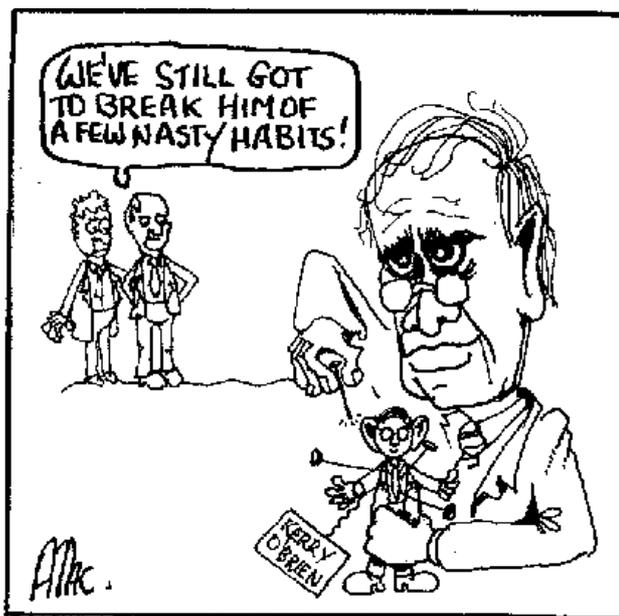
Explain the World Behind the News

Rage till Dawn then Doctor Who
Down to Earth No Pay TV
That's what it means to me

When all the signals are weak and confused

You know the one to tune into
An Australian Story true as blue
You know the one to tune into

Friends can purchase a copy at the Shearans (02) 4388 2316.



update

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FABC Update

Post The Editor
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PO Box 1391
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ABC Enjoys AFI Honours

The ABC usually claims a lion's share of credit at the annual AFI Awards. This year, the 45th, was no exception.

The ABC walked away with eight awards. MDA won the Holding Redlich award for best drama series.

Shane Bourne of MDA won the Best Actor in a leading role in television comedy or drama, as did Angie Milliken of MDA as Best Actress in a leading role in drama or comedy

Enough Rope won for host Andrew Denton and Anita Jacoby the Como Melbourne AFI best light entertainment series.

Grass Roots claimed two awards: best screen play in television for the episode 'By-Election' written by Geoffrey Atherden, while the late

John Clayton was awarded best actor for his performance in a supporting or guest role in the same episode.

Best children's television drama went to *Out There* by Michael Bourchier.

The Film Australia AFI award for best documentary went to *Wildness* by Michael McMahon.

The Longford Lifetime Achievement award this year reflected much that has been seen on ABC TV over the years.

The deserving winner was Ted Robinson - producer of *The Glass House*, *Good News Week* and *The Way We Were* among many programs - in recognition of his contribution to creating comedy programs on Australian television.



Enough Rope host Andrew Denton

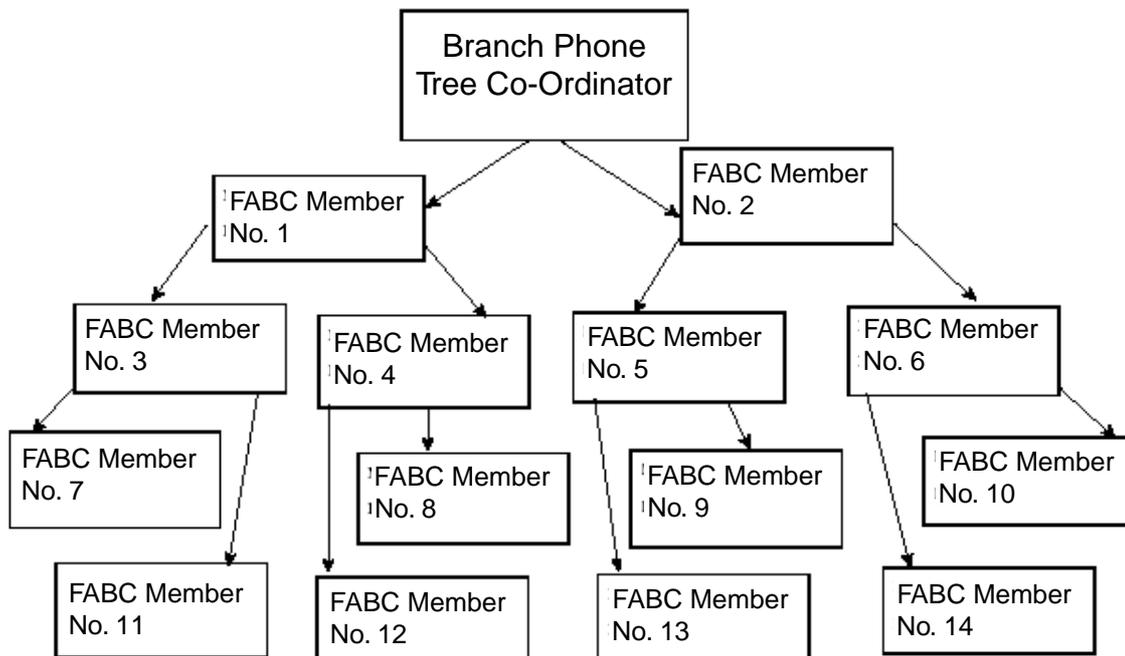


Shane Bourne Best Actor in a leading role in television comedy or drama.



Angie Milliken Best Actress in a leading role in drama or comedy.

An Old-fashioned Telephone Call is still an Asset



A well planned phone tree cannot be denied. Our phone tree expert Nan Manefield explains:

There are 10 phone trees in Sydney and seven in regional NSW. Size varies. Each Sydney branch comprises a co-ordinator and 30 Friends. The President sends me a message to be relayed and I activate the trees through their

coordinators. Each member in turn then passes it onto two designated phone tree Friends. The message is also passed to the starting point of each regional tree. Currently statewide there are 433 'phoning' Friends.

News as a 21st Century Political Prisoner - the missing "Middle Ground"

Continued from Page 1

"Our journalistic culture may soon enough resemble that of early 19th century America, in which party owned newspapers presented selective versions of the truth. News addressed to a particular niche - not simply in its content but also in its politics - may be the natural match to an era with hundreds of satellite and cable channels and limitless numbers of Internet sites.

"An age of more...commercial, more openly partisan media laws leaves out some of the functions that news was until recently expected to perform: giving a broad public...information for making political decisions, and telling people about trends and events they didn't already know they were interested in."+



The Middle Ground

Walter noted that the Second Iraq War was a conflict framed by President Bush's dictum, enunciated after 11th September, that nations were either with the United States or against the U.S. - there was no in between - in the so-called war on terror.

"In between, of course, is the traditional home turf of journalism, and despite the very live issues of legiti-

macy and diplomatic process surrounding the Iraq conflict, there were powerful forces at work that made holding the middle ground difficult," Walter said.

"It went so far, in this country, that journalistic objectivity itself was branded as unpatriotic. Journalists and programs were singled out for attack for presuming to offer analysis, context or individual correspondents' perspectives on the relentless stream of sanctioned and sanitised information flowing from political and military sources."



He referred to Geoffrey Barker in the *Australian Financial Review* (Oct 18th, 2003), "The demands of Australian patriotism are becoming too onerous," Barker writes.

"Team Australia"

"Once it was enough to love a sun-burned country, to enjoy and to appreciate the uncomplicated, if provincial, Australian lifestyle.

"Political, intellectual, artistic and even religious life was rich, diverse, vigorous and not averse to risk-taking. Australians could argue politics, economics, religion and sport, remember their honoured dead with

reverence and get on with life with all its pleasures, pains, loves and hates.

"Not any more. In a potentially sinister evolution, bloated and seemingly interminable spectacles of grief and glory have been authoritarian politics continued by other means. The prime minister is assigned a starring role, with the opposition leader in a subordinate role. And the unspoken subtext is always the same: here in our grief, here in our athletic (or military) triumph, we stand united. One nation. One people. Opposition or even scepticism is unseemly and unpatriotic, an affront to 'Team Australia'."

Barker concluded: "In these circumstances, the true patriot is not he or she who joins in the wails and whoopee. The true patriot is the dissenter who dares to question the creation and manipulation of mass politically correct opinion."



"The true patriot punches the air when educators are honoured and when students achieve in demanding intellectual disciplines. That way lies true national glory."



**The Atlantic Monthly*
September 2003.
+ *ibid*

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Plea from our Hon. Treasurer

About once each week I receive a notice from the bank telling me of an error in a member's credit card number, resulting in a debit to our account of the membership fee in question.

This means I have to look up the renewal form, call the member, often leave a message, and hope the call is returned.

The error is very often the result of member's not using their reading glasses, so I get a lot of 8s mistaken for 3s and 3s mistaken for 8s! Other errors are caused by numbers written in such a way that I have to guess at what is an '0' and what is a '6' or a '9'. '7' can also look like a '1'.

My plea: Please give a thought to your poor Hon. Treasurer, who has to copy down 22 digits for every credit card entry! Thank you!

P.S. I know of a good job going on our committee - any volunteers?

Goodbye Senator Alston

No tears were shed. There were no regrets - just a sense of relief. The ABC had survived its foe. His departure blurred the turmoil of his extraordinary attack on the ABC for its alleged bias against the United States in its coverage of the Iraqi war. It was as though the PM had reached into the yard and dragged a foaming attack dog back inside the house. Presumably the matter is over, with Alston's demands for yet another complaints tribunal tactfully abandoned in favour of the existing ones he once endorsed and supported.

Alston's warrant, it was clear, was to curb the ABC's independence, keep the broadcaster on short rations funding and constantly on the back foot under contrived public pressure



Alas, it was too difficult a course to keep, in the storm of the

Minister's 68 complaints. Here was a ministerial presentation the public had rarely seen from Senator Alston - a performance of red-faced fury, as though determined to administer a final flaying of the ABC.

The public response he got was evident in that reliable barometer - Letters to the Editor - like those in the *Sydney Morning Herald* after the Independent Review Panel rejected all but 17 of Alston's 68 complaints and most of those it accepted, it regarded as minor.

"In anyone's language 51 to 17 is a flogging. In league terms it would qualify Alston for the wooden spoon for his performance."

Joe Byrne (Ballina).

"I hope the 'independent' panel that found the ABC guilty of 17 counts of bias will find Senator Alston - guilty of 51 counts of serious bias against the ABC."

Michael Strautmans (Rostrevor SA).

"With a mere quarter of his complaints vindicated - Richard Alston is hardly in a position to maintain that 'this was a devastating indictment of the ABC' "If anyone has demonstrated bias it is Alston in his emotional, erratic and at times irrational outbursts against the ABC."

Fred Jansohn (Rose Bay).

"The ABC's score is now on the board (not perfect but pretty good). When can we see the outcome of similarly rigorous assessment of the coverage of channels Seven, Nine and Ten?"

Julie Monton (Bellingen)

"So, the ABC showed bias in reporting the Iraq war. Now, when are we having the enquiry into the pro-war bias reported by just about everyone but the ABC?"

Greg Buck (Fitzroy, Vic.)

A Glimpse of the New Minister

The SMH's Cosima Marriner was one of the first journalists to interview the new Communications Minister. Try as she may have, she gained nothing encouraging. The government's media policies are set in concrete, including its hostile view of the ABC. Here's an extract.



Daryl Williams

Howard has made it clear that Williams' aspirations within communications would be constrained by cabinet decisions and Government policy. Williams has signalled he is unlikely to undertake any radical policy shifts, reiterating that all major decisions have already been made by cabinet.

But Williams has already changed the Government's course in one significant area... Williams says he intends to communicate "freely and effectively" with the ABC."...almost everyone has personal biases I think the important thing is that the ABC should have processes in place to ensure that the personal views of presenters, and reporters don't result in a breach of their obligations.

"I tend to try to and think of...what's in the interest of the average member of the public."

Here's an insiders view: the appointment of Williams indicates the Government wants to 'mogadon' the ABC in the run up to an election, making it harder for the FABC to combat the Government's media agendas. Williams is described as cautious, stubborn, diligent and thoughtful, but a poor communicator; a capable technocrat, but not a policy person. Alston-like attacks on the ABC are unlikely from Williams. The nasty work will be left to backbenchers like Senator Santo Santoro, who has reinvented himself as a "true friend" of the ABC, not one like us or so he claimed in an angry letter to Gary Cook. Ed.

Next in *Update* in the New Year -

The issues as Australia heads for a Federal election - perhaps even an unlikely double dissolution - we'll sum up the issues we should all be blitzing Prime Minister, Minister, and local members with in a letter-writing campaign. Let's see what the new year ushers in, what fates befall and, at the moment, perhaps, most urgent of all - a free trade agreement with the United States.

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Namer		Email:	
Please Print			
Address		Suburb	P/Code
Phone (Home)	(Work)	Mob	
Federal Electorate			
Age Group		My details will be passed on to my local FABC Branch. (Strike out if you disagree)	
<input type="checkbox"/> 30 or under <input type="checkbox"/> 31-50 <input type="checkbox"/> 51+		Membership No. _____	
I would like to join <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to renew <input type="checkbox"/> I am interested in helping <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to join the phone/fax/email network <input type="checkbox"/>		(and help pass on information to members)	
I/We apply for membership of FABC (NSW) Inc. and accept its objectives and rules. Signature: _____			
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$20	I am paying by <input type="checkbox"/> cheque in favour of FABC (NSW) Inc. <input type="checkbox"/> money order <input type="checkbox"/> bankcard <input type="checkbox"/> mastercard <input type="checkbox"/> visa Card number _____ Name on credit card _____ Expiry date _____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Family/Household	\$25		
<input type="checkbox"/> Student	\$15		
<input type="checkbox"/> Pensioner	\$15		
<input type="checkbox"/> Corporate (covers 3 members)	\$60		
<input type="checkbox"/> I would like to make a donation	\$ _____		
Cardholders signature		Amount \$	