

1<sup>st</sup> June 2011

Maurice Newman AC  
Chairman  
ABC Board  
GPO Box 9994  
Sydney NSW 2600



Dear Mr Newman

**Re: ABC In-house Production and the Melbourne Accommodation Project (MAP)**

Since its inception the ABC was envisaged as a producer - a maker of programs of cultural value and intellectual integrity, not simply a broadcaster of material produced externally. Its independence depends on it having a strong component of in-house production in all program genres.

Yet in recent years, Friends of the ABC has viewed with dismay the ABC's shedding of many talented creative and technical staff who have produced programs that delighted and informed ABC TV audiences. We have seen ABC TV production scaled down to the point where no Australian drama is any longer produced in-house and the broadcaster's highly acclaimed Natural History Unit has been closed.

ABC resources have been increasingly diverted to the private production sector at the expense of in-house television production in Sydney and in Melbourne, where its Ripponlea studios were once a hive of activity making programs for the ABC. We are unaware of any non-news and current affairs television production that is happening or has been planned for Queensland, South Australia or West Australia at this time, and understand that no decision has been made on the future of Tasmania's single in-house production.

10,425 members of the community who signed the petition to the ABC Board which FABC presented to you late last year called on the Board to rebuild the ABC's production capacity to ensure the broadcaster develops a range of high quality programs, and is no longer so dependent on outsourced production.

It is the view of many discerning ABC audience members that the quality of much local ABC television programming has declined. FABC regularly receives feedback that TV programming has become too populist and less innovative - the entertainment less stimulating, and factual programming more lightweight.

A secure base from which to nurture and develop future in-house and external talent is being lost, as the critical mass required for the ABC to remain a program producer is eroded.

ABC outsourcing looks no longer to be used to provide opportunities and support for up-and-coming producers with new ideas. Outsourced programming screened on ABC TV is often barely distinguishable from that which appears on commercial outlets. Not surprising, given that ABC television production looks to have been overwhelmingly handed over to production companies and that programs produced for the ABC are also being made with sales to commercial content providers in mind at the outset. The financial interest of private production companies to secure ongoing business with the ABC is a further incentive not to take the risks that are needed to achieve edgy programming.

The strongly centralised commissioning model which results from the ABC's high level of outsourcing inevitably leads to loss of diversity and innovation within program genres. It is also resulting in less local production in states outside NSW. This is unacceptable for a public broadcaster which is meant to operate in the interests of the entire nation.

The ABC's oft-repeated claim that it is committed to a mixture of internal and external TV production is not reflected in the broadcaster's huge volume of television outsourcing or the publicly reported comments of Kim Dalton in the period he has headed ABC television. The ABC's attempt to redefine outsourcing, by referring to programs that are commissioned by the ABC or in which the ABC has minimal creative input as 'co-productions', is corporate-speak nonsense.

The extent to which the ABC is a producer of its own content goes to the type of broadcaster the ABC will become - whether or not the ABC will remain a truly independent national public broadcaster. It is also critical to the ABC's survival. If the ABC comes to be viewed as a platform for content provided by external commercial providers, governments won't consider that it warrants taxpayer support. The ABC won't attract the strong community defence it has in the past when under attack from governments which would prefer to see the public broadcaster downsized, if not entirely outsourced or commercialised.

FABC is concerned to learn that the relatively small number of television production staff who remain in Melbourne have been given no assurances concerning the inclusion of production facilities in the new ABC facilities that are being planned as part of the Melbourne Accommodation Project (MAP).

Friends of the ABC asks the ABC Board to develop a plan to rebuild the ABC's in-house production capacity, and in the meantime seeks your assurance that no steps will be taken which may result in even further loss of in-house production. With regard to ABC television programming, excluding news and current affairs, FABC would appreciate being informed of the number of hours of in-house programming and the number of hours of programming that is not produced in-house which is being planned in the foreseeable years for each ABC television program genre in each state and territory.

We look forward to receiving your response to our requests.

Yours sincerely

David Risstrom  
President

GS:CorrespABC