

18<sup>th</sup> October 2011

Ms Kate Dundas  
Director  
ABC Radio  
GPO Box 9994  
Sydney NSW 2001



Dear Kate

**Re: Radio National - draft 2012 schedule and other matters**

Thank you for sending to FABC Radio National's draft schedule for 2012.

There is always much interest and passion about what Radio National does, and we would like to provide our feedback on matters on which we received strong and consistent comment from FABC members who considered the 2012 draft schedule.

Feedback that FABC received supported in broad terms the aims outlined in your covering letter, but with some important caveats and queries, and strong disagreement with how the ABC plans to implement some of them in practice.

It appears that programming in some time blocks has been subverted in favour of increased 'generalist' and 'flow' programming, which is contrary to the stated interest in "more specialisation" and the strong interest that RN listeners have for distinct, specialised programs.

In the absence of more information, the claim that a new late *Drive* program and an extended *Breakfast* program "recognises the mobility and availability of audience needs at these busy times of the day" was not meaningful. It is not clear to us why specialist programs should be cut from the 8.30am weekday timeslot and a critical program, *PM*, reduced in favour of increased 'generalist' programming.

It was also unclear what a "renewed emphasis on arts and culture" meant, and how it is reflected in the 2012 schedule.

**Specific matters:**

- People support the continuation of existing programs that are incorporated in RN's draft 2012 schedule, with one exception which people would tolerate in respect for the interests of others if some valuable programs were not being cut, and which we deal with later in that context.
- *PM* is the most important evening round up of daily current affairs on radio, and particularly for people unable to tune to electronic media between the morning and the late afternoon or early evening. RN listeners are alarmed that *PM* may be cut to 30 minutes. (Or does that 30 minutes include a news bulletin, so that the duration of *PM* becomes only 20 minutes?) Many RN listeners do not tune to local radio. Furthermore, if *PM* is cut to 30 minutes on RN, what guarantee is there that it will remain an hour-long program on local radio in the future?
- Program broadcast times are irrelevant for those who listen to programming via podcast. However there is strong objection from RN listeners not in the workforce, who are overwhelmingly less likely to engage in podcasting, to the specialist half hour programs on Monday to Friday being moved from 8.30 – 9 am to 5.30 – 6.00pm. Without exception, this group reported that they are far more likely to listen to programs of substance before 9am than they are to be at home at 5.30pm (i.e., pre-dinner) with time to listen to programs that require concentration.

- There is strong opposition to *Breakfast* continuing past 8.30am. It was thought that on many mornings *Breakfast* already contains too much content which is trivial and seems to be filler, and commentary on mainstream commercial television programming that is unlikely to interest many RN listeners. In the rare instances that breaking news is so important and occurs at a time that it needs to be broadcast between 8.30am and 9am, people said they would prefer to have a regular 8.30am specialist program held over to the following week, than to have *Breakfast* regularly extended.
- With RN listeners believing the network's strength is in it having distinct, well-researched programs that deal with specialist subjects, there is not support for a *Drive* program. Furthermore, generalist programming that covers a variety of topics superficially is already available on local radio.
- People are concerned to know that they will be able to continue to tune to individual programs of interest to them at set times, for example *Ockham's Razor* or *Background Briefing*, and that these programs will not be reduced in length. They also asked how new audience members will know when to tune to such programs if they become incorporated under generalist program block names, such as "WEEKEND EXTRA". In Fairfax's weekly print television guide, which most ABC audiences rely on, *AM*, for example, is not identified separately within RN *Breakfast*.
- There is strong support for the reintroduction of the *Media Report*. Given the media's importance to so many other matters and rapid changes that are occurring in the media, it is considered that this program would again become essential listening.
- There is strong interest in the return of a program that considers current religious matters. Though its new title of *Religion and Ethics Report* created some confusion about what its focus might be. A number of people expressed the view that the program should not imply that ethics are the domain of religion, and that if the program's focus is on ethics, as opposed to current religious matters, that ethics also be considered from a non-religious perspective.
- Concern was expressed at the disappearance of some important programs from next year's RN schedule altogether. *The National Interest* is regarded as an excellent program which examines policy issues in a thoughtful and informative manner. Radio Australia's *Asia Pacific* program has declined in quality over the years. But with the need and interest of Australians to gain a greater understanding of our neighbours, people believed it should become better resourced, not cut. While *Australia Talks* was thought to be more effective when Sandy McCutcheon was its presenter, there remains a need for intelligent and informed talkback on current topics.

People favoured a program of the calibre of *The National Interest* being maintained over *Counterpoint*, a program thought not to meet RN's usual standards, including by those with conservative opinions. Furthermore, while they like the concept and believe that *Future Tense* is a valuable program, based on its programs to date, they are doubtful there is sufficient content of interest to warrant it being extended by 30 minutes to one hour.

- Displeasure was expressed by people who presently listen to *Encounter* and *Correspondents' Report* on Sunday mornings with the plan to move these programs to an even earlier timeslot. While *Encounter* is repeated at another time on a different day, *Correspondents' Report* is not.
- The irritation of RN listeners at repeats is not with programs that are repeated once at a regular time within a week of their original broadcast. On the contrary, many find it useful to know when they can reliably tune to a program they missed. Their strong displeasure is with repeats that are run more than once and at the times at which first-run broadcasts of a program would otherwise have been scheduled; for example, as occurs in the Summertime when many regular RN listeners still wish to listen to RN.

- RN listeners who experienced some the ABC's wonderful arts programs of the past already lament the loss of people who specialised in different areas in the arts and do not want arts programming to be further diluted. There is strong opposition to the axing of the hour-long *Artsworks* program, and to the merging of arts into the *The Book Show* (presently forty-five minutes), to become the hour-long *Arts and Books* program. While the topic of arts includes books, the arts covers a far broader range of topics, and people's interest is that RN both maintains arts programming that covers a range of art forms and keeps RN's distinct and excellent books program.

While writing to you about RN's draft 2012 schedule, we will take this opportunity to raise a few other matters concerning RN:

- The success of every program depends on it being well-resourced and on its producers and presenters. RN audiences are anxious that existing RN producers and presenters of excellence not be moved from their specialised program area. FABC is also keen for the ABC to be training and mentoring new talent, so that RN's high standards will continue to be maintained in the future.
- When FABC consulted some of its active members about RN's 2012 schedule it did not request ideas for new programs, but a few interesting suggestions of interest for regular programs which were forthcoming were:
  - a program devoted to Australian folklore;
  - a program that would investigate consumer matters – not straightforward breaches of consumer law, but systemic problems and/or unfairness in aspects of commercial or government service delivery that affects the public as consumers or citizens; the ABC could follow-up and call relevant authorities to account;
  - programs for children; digital radio, in particular, provides a wonderful opportunity for the ABC to reintroduce children's radio programming. Radio programming can provide a totally different experience for children – one which would be welcomed by many parents and would also introduce a new generation to the important medium of radio.
- FABC receives complaints from people in different parts of Australia who want to listen to RN but experience reception problems; for example, in areas of Bendigo and Gippsland (Victoria) and Armidale (NSW). FABC would appreciate being informed why there is not a high standard of RN transmission to all major regional areas of Australia and what plans the ABC has to rectify deficiencies and gaps. We would also like to know if digital transmission will overcome these problems and the timetable for RN's digital transmission across the country.
- A matter that FABC raised in its letter to RN Acting Manager on June 23, and to which it did not receive a response, was the suggestion that the ABC seek to influence the design of content delivery devices, such as MP3 players, so that the major brands become capable of delivering real-time radio. (We had in mind the ABC seeking to influence hardware suppliers, as it did to facilitate its interests in the conversion to digital television.) Or is this a matter that will be rectified by radio becoming digital?

Friends of the ABC hopes that its feedback and comments have been of assistance to you in your consideration of Radio National programming. We would welcome feedback you wish to give on any of the matters it has raised and discussing them with you if wanted, and look forward to receiving further information on RN's 2012 schedule as it is finalised.

Yours sincerely

David Risstrom - President, Friends of the ABC (Vic)  
for Friends of the ABCs Australia-wide

GS:CorrespondABC