

27th October 2010

The Hon Kevin Rudd, MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Mr Rudd

Re: Australia Network Tender | Future of Australia's International Broadcasting Services

Friends of the ABC (FABC) extends its congratulations on your appointment as the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

FABC wishes to inform you of its strong view that Australia's interests are best served by the country's publicly-funded international television service remaining a service of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The relevance and overwhelming benefits to Australia of the national public broadcaster providing the country's international broadcasting services leads FABC to conclude it is wasteful of public resources to require the ABC to enter into a competitive tender process to continue to provide Australia Network.

The national broadcaster has the legislative authority and the responsibility to provide the nation's international broadcasting services. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 specifies it is a function of the ABC to broadcast to countries outside Australia to encourage awareness of Australia and its attitudes on world affairs, and to inform Australians outside Australia. (Section 6 (1) b)

The functions, independence and accountability to the Parliament of Australia's comprehensive national public broadcaster make it the body which is most appropriate and by far best equipped to provide the country's international television broadcasting service. It would be totally inappropriate and contrary to the public interest for a service that represents, and is of such strategic importance to be provided by a company with foreign interests, or a private operator that is driven by commercial imperatives or which may have political agendas.

Throughout the years the ABC has provided Australia's international broadcasting services it has delivered a high quality, effective service. It would be foolish to risk losing the advantage of the ABC's outstanding record and trusted reputation in a highly competitive international broadcasting field by putting the service to tender. The experience when the former Coalition government handed Australia's international television service to a commercial broadcaster - low standard content and the subsequent collapse of the service - damaged the perception of Australia abroad.

The present arrangement under which the ABC provides Australia Network on a contract from DFAT prevents the best outcome for Australian international broadcasting. Australia's international radio and television services would both be weakened if the television service were to be separated from the ABC which operates Radio Australia. As long as the ABC must continue to tender to provide Australia Network it is not feasible for the ABC to integrate the resources and content-gathering of Radio Australia and Australia Network or to draw them more tightly together for public identification. The cross-platform leveraging and presence internationally of the BBC, for example, is strengthened by the delivery of its radio, television and online services under a single banner.

The effectiveness of Australia's international broadcasting services depends on them being independent and being seen to be independent from both political and commercial influence. The independence of Australia Network and, by association, Radio Australia, is compromised by the manner in which Australia's international television service is presently funded; i.e., through DFAT and commercial revenue.

The funding of Australia Network through the department that is responsible to promote Australia's interests abroad (instead of the Communications portfolio) undermines the ABC's independence from government which is specified in the ABC Act. While the ABC's excellent international services undoubtedly assist the Australian Government's diplomatic efforts, it is not the role of the country's independent national broadcaster to be a government agent for diplomacy. That would undermine the ABC's independence and our overseas neighbours' trust in it. Furthermore, it should be sufficient that on any occasion it is required, the ABC Act allows the Government to override the ABC in the national interest. (Section 78(5) and (6))

There is no sound reason to believe that advertising comprises any less risk to editorial content on Australia Network than it would if it was allowed on other ABC services. Besides, in countries where commercial and political interests are intertwined, commercial advertising also risks the perception of a lack of independence from local political forces.

Friends of the ABC submits that:

1. Australia Network be returned to being a service of the ABC; i.e., the publicly funded international television broadcasting service should not be subject to a competitive tender process;
2. the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 be amended so the ABC is specified as the body responsible to provide Australia's publicly funded international broadcasting services, regardless of the delivery platform, and with the Act's prohibition of advertising and commercial sponsorship applying to all ABC services;
3. the ABC's base triennial funding (i.e., untied funding which is provided via budget appropriations to the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy) be increased so that the ABC is fully funded to provide Australia's international broadcasting services on all delivery platforms i.e., so that Australia Network is no longer funded by DFAT and no longer needs to earn revenue through advertising or sponsorship;
4. increased funds be provided to the ABC to enable the services of Radio Australia to be rebuilt and expanded;
5. The ABC's international broadcasters be provided secure access to the transmission facilities required to independently deliver their services wherever it is feasible; and
6. the ABC as a whole be well funded so that it is able to produce high quality news and current affairs and a broad range of local programs from which its international broadcasting services can draw.

Friends of the ABC believes that the representation of Australia and its values in the world has a significant impact on all Australians. FABC (Vic) made a detailed submission to DFAT on the future direction of Australia Network in July this year. However, as DFAT had invited only industry submissions on this matter, we are unaware if FABC's submission was considered, and if so, what weight may have been given to it.

Friends of the ABC would appreciate your serious consideration of, and response to, all of the matters raised in this letter.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely

David Risstrom (FABC Vic President)
for FABC New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and West Australia.

cc: Senator Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications & the Digital Economy
GS:correspALPGovtAusNetwork