

# News+Views

Issue 31 / Spring 2009

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News+Views is the newsletter of Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc.

GPO Box 4065,  
Melbourne, VIC 3001  
tel +613 9682 0073  
fax +613 9682 0074  
fabcvic@vicnet.net.au  
www.fabc.org.au  
Inc No. A0034181A

The next big threat

## Murdoch eyes on ABC

Can Friends of the ABC relax and look forward to a flourishing future for national public broadcasting?

The ABC has received a modest increase in funding. The new system of appointment to the board of the ABC promises to be fairer and to provide more knowledgeable board members committed to public broadcasting. Nevertheless members of Friends of the ABC should gird themselves for the next battle.

Recently you may have read of James Murdoch, scion of the Murdoch empire, giving the James McTaggart lecture in Edinburgh to a mostly media-industry audience. In it he attacked the BBC, and by extension all publicly funded broadcasters with these words: "The expansion of state-sponsored journalism is a threat to the plurality and independence of news provision, which are

so important to our democracy." The words were carefully chosen; "state-sponsored journalism" has

Orwellian overtones which "independent publicly funded broadcaster" lacks. Those aware of the high concentration of media ownership in Australia and the part played by News Limited in furthering that concentration might wonder about the commitment to plurality which Mr Murdoch espouses.

What was the reason for the attack and the somewhat surprising emergence of the

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Media mogul with Berlusconi ambitions

Good news, but work to do . . .

## Secure an independent ABC board

The Government has taken a major step to protect the ABC's independence.

In October the Government introduced into the Federal Parliament a bill that, if adopted, will enshrine in law the process it implemented to fill recent vacancies on the governing boards of the ABC and SBS.

Importantly, the *National Broadcasting Legislation Amendment Bill* would also restore to the ABC Board the staff-elected position abolished by the Howard government in 2006.

Prior to the last election, the practice of governments appointing mates to the governing board of the ABC was in danger of spiralling out of control, eroding public trust in the national broadcaster and in the integrity of government.

The new system proposed in the Bill can't guarantee the independence of the ABC from political interference. (In keeping with the Westminster tradition of accountability, elected governments will still make the final decision on who to appoint to its board.) Nevertheless, with its assessment of candidates at arms-length from government and against published criteria, it would be a significant improvement.

The staff-elected position ensures there is at least one ABC Board member with intimate understanding of public broadcasting and who is entirely independent of government.

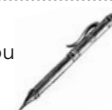
Labor's Bill offers a halt to the stacking of the ABC Board. The Greens and Senator Xenophon gave commitments to Friends of the ABC prior to the election that they would support such legislation. Its carriage now depends on the vote of at least one member of the Liberal-National Coalition or Victorian Family First senator, Steve Fielding.

This Bill is the outcome of Friends of the ABC's efforts over many years. NOW is a critical time to let politicians know that we expect each and every one of them to demonstrate their respect for the independence of Australia's foremost cultural institution by supporting the legislation.

Write to: Senator Fielding, Parliament House, Canberra 2600. If you do not reside in a Coalition-held electorate, write to:

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull, Leader of the Opposition and/or The Hon Warren Truss, Leader of The Nationals.

A brief outline of the National Broadcasting Legislation Amendment Bill's key aspects is on page 4



## Commercial tail wags program dog

How many cooking shows will the ABC produce? It seems, as many as it can to sell cookbooks that make money.

The ABC has recruited Poh Ling Yeow, runner up in the *MasterChef Australia* program on the Ten Network, to host her own cooking show on ABC TV, at the same time signing Poh up to produce cookbooks.

While the community was initially pleased for the ABC to generate income through the sale of its programs, audiences are now driven mad with program and product advertising on its radio and TV channels ('announcements of its activities', as the ABC refers to them in its efforts to circumvent the ABC Act's clear prohibition on advertising).

But the public broadcaster's engagement in commercial activities has not only led to the annoyance of ads. It has reached the point where there is good reason for concern about the extent to which the ABC's commercial activities have begun to drive its programming.



Simon Bryant making a cocktail in ABC TV's, *The Cook & The Chef*



## Bendable Learnings

The ABC gets a mention in *Bendable Learnings*, Don's Watson's new book about how 'noxious management drivel' is spreading like poison through our entire culture.

It says something positive about the national broadcaster that the only ABC example he gives is one from an ABC corporate spokesperson and not from a program presenter. Though Don missed the big one – the ABC managing director's not infrequent reference to the great information and cultural institution he heads, as a 'brand'. Or does Mark Scott know something about where he is taking the ABC that we don't?

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## Murdoch eyes on ABC

spokesman of the Murdoch empire as the champion of "plurality and independence of news provision"? The answer lies in the increasingly difficult economic environment for newspapers now that much of the printed news can be accessed on-line through search engines or, alternatively, news is provided by BBC or ABC websites free of charge. As readership of hardcopy newspapers falls advertisers balk at paying high fees to publishers and profits are at stake.

This has led to media proprietors eying the public funding provided to national public broadcasters and speculating whether they can either get part of that revenue themselves or restrict the national broadcaster to areas which are not serviced by commercial entrepreneurs. In other words to reduce the competition.

In a recent interview on Fox Business television Rupert Murdoch said:

"You're going to have to pay for your favourite newspaper on the web. ... People are reading news today, they're reading it on the web, they're reading on Google, they're reading on whatever. Interviewer: They're reading it for free. Murdoch: Exactly, and that's going to stop."

We are, in effect, seeing a rerun of an earlier battle between technologies which took place in the 1930s. Then radio, initially seen as purely an entertainment medium, began to provide news services as well. Keith Murdoch, extremely influential with the Australian UAP government, pressured the

government to change the legislation creating the ABC to restrict the public broadcaster from collecting its own news. (RN *Background Briefing* 4/10/09). In order to protect the sales of evening newspapers there was also an arrangement that news was not broadcast until later in the evening. As the importance of broadcasting developed newspapers allied themselves with broadcasters. One example of this was the Herald and Weekly Times Limited, under Sir Keith Murdoch, taking over



Murdoch's vision for the ABC

3DB in 1930 and expanding the business greatly during that decade. In 1937 he said: "The *Melbourne Herald* was one of the first newspapers in the world to develop the theory that newspaper work and broadcasting could be joined to the advantage of all concerned. In particular we wanted newspapers to get in closer touch with the public. We exist only to provide the public with services." (Quoted in RN *Background Briefing* 4/10/09). This last sentence conflicts somewhat with the chairman of the *West Australian* who said bluntly that commercial media exist for "distributing advertising".

This rather more honest assessment of the role of commercial media matches that of FABC. A recent submission to the National Human Rights Consultation by FABC (Vic) emphasized the differences between the commercial media and publicly funded broadcasters. "Unlike the commercial media which exists to earn a profit, the public broadcasters have charters that entail them addressing their audiences as citizens, not consumers. The ABC is a comprehensive broadcaster which informs, educates and provides quality entertainment. Funded by government and independent in spirit and at law, the ABC is able to report without fear or favour, uncompromised by commercial or political influence."

We have seen how, under an unsympathetic government, the quality and capacity of the ABC can be eroded. In the new media environment, with increased cross media ownership and greater economic pressures, commercial interests see public broadcasters as competitors for audience share and thus affecting their revenue. A reduced, ineffective and less popular ABC is in the financial interests of commercial media outlets.

In order to maintain high quality, independent broadcasting expressing a diversity of views and catering to all the citizens of Australia, it is vital that public broadcasting fulfil its role and meet its charter obligations. Any attempt by commercial media to restrict public broadcasting must be vigorously resisted.

Gael Barrett

Most of us only access small parts of ABC, often unaware of the public broadcaster's other wonderful networks, programs and content. From time to time, *News + Views* plans to feature different parts of the ABC to encourage you to try something new. If you know of any gems – old or new, a special regular program or area on the ABC's website – please let us know.

## Discover history where it happened

With ABC *Sidetracks* uncover Sydney's hidden past. Explore some of Sydney's oldest inner city suburbs - the people, buildings and events. Discover history where it happened, on the streets. You don't have to be a Sydney local to get sidetracked!

*Sydney Sidetracks* is a unique multi-platform, interactive project which showcases a range of historic audio, film, text and images via an interactive map, which can be seen on a mobile phone while out and about or online.

By combining the resources of the ABC with the incredible collections of other great cultural institutions it starts to build an interactive social history of Australia's oldest city.

- There are three ways to explore this content:
- *Sidetracks Online*: Zoom-in to different locations on the interactive map to reveal the wonderful and the sinister secrets of the city.
- *Sidetracks Mobile*: Immerse yourself in the sights, sounds and smells of the city by downloading the mobile version and hitting the streets.
- *Downloads*: Individual stories and photos are yours to keep. Download your favourite parts to your PC or laptop or load them onto a portable device to enjoy in your own time.



The ABC interviewed Juanita Nielsen just months before she disappeared in 1974. Juanita's interview and many more can be accessed at: [abc.net.au/sidetracks](http://abc.net.au/sidetracks)

*Sydney Sidetracks* also accepts audience generated content. Visitors can dig into their own collections and build a profile on the *Your Stories* page to contribute videos, audio, photos or stories that others can explore.

The project features content from the ABC's rich archives along with material from the collections of the National Film and Sound Archive, the Powerhouse Museum, the State Library of NSW, The Museum of Contemporary Art and The Dictionary of Sydney in partnership with the City of Sydney.

Some of the rare and interesting content you will discover includes film footage shot from a moving tram in 1906; sound recorded on location at Martin Place during VP Day 1945; a candid interview with notorious gunman, Chow Hayes; and many archival photographs of people and places that are long gone but not forgotten.

Visit Sidetracks at [abc.net.au/sidetracks](http://abc.net.au/sidetracks) Whether or not Sidetracks will be extended to other cities depends upon the kind of audience response it receives.

## Marginalising the arts

### More or less arts

In the ABC's recent launch of its new arts website, tucked away was the revelation that ABC1's 60-minute magazine-style arts show, *Sunday Arts*, will be replaced with a 30-minute program called *Art Nation*.

Friends of the ABC must rejoice in the ABC's new "digital arts gateway". It opens up wonderful opportunities to enhance the delivery of, and engagement in the arts.

But at the same time, the national broadcaster's reduction of specialist arts programming on its primary television channel continues the marginalisation of arts that has been occurring through its scheduling and steady erosion on radio and television over the past decade.

Many in the community still don't have meaningful access to the web. For others, tel-

evision remains a favoured way to view some content. Some art forms lend themselves more to the bigger screen of television. Radio and TV allow a shared audience experience that solitary access through a computer does not.

Cuts to the ABC's already meagre television arts programming are an abrogation of the ABC's charter responsibilities. For the arts to thrive and enrich the life of Australia and all of its citizens, they must be central to what the ABC does. They must be a prominent and integral part of its content across all platforms – online, radio and television.



You can view and participate in the ABC's arts website at [www.abc.net.au/arts](http://www.abc.net.au/arts)

# Bill for new ABC board system

The National Broadcasting Legislation Amendment Bill introduced by the Government in October proposes:

1. A merit-based selection process for the ABC and SBS boards with the following features:
  - board vacancies to be advertised and open to all Australians to apply, except that current and former politicians and senior political staff would be ineligible for appointment
  - assessment of applicants to be undertaken against a set of selection criteria by an independent Nomination Panel to be convened by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and established at arms-length from government
  - the Panel to provide a short list of recommended candidates to the Communications Minister, with the Minister required to provide reasons to Parliament in any instance the Minister's appointment departs from the shortlist
  - in the case of the ABC chair, selection to be made by the Prime Minister, who will be obliged to consult the Opposition Leader
2. The staff-elected director position on the ABC Board to be restored.



**Howard Government appointees who form the majority on the present ABC Board: Maurice Newman, Chair – former head of the Stock Exchange; Janet Albrechtsen – newspaper columnist with Murdoch's *The Australian*; Peter Hurley – Australian Hotels Association official which has close ties to the Liberal Party; Steven Skala – Vice-Chairman Deutsche Bank and board member of the right-wing Centre for Independent Studies; Keith Windschuttle – a leading protagonist in the 'history and culture wars' who openly supports advertising on the ABC.**

## Friends farewell

### Peter Milton

The ABC lost a true friend when Peter Milton, a longtime member of FABC, died recently of cancer. As a Labor Member of Parliament for La Trobe in the 1980s, Peter defended the ABC against attacks of both the Coalition Government and his own. When he became seriously ill in 2008, Peter retired from FABC's committee of management and regular volunteer work, yet still submitted a paper to the Government's ABC & SBS Review.



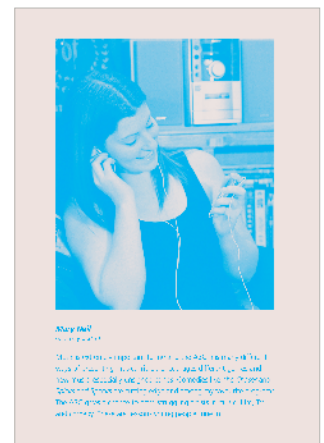
Peter will be remembered by many of us at FABC for his high ethical standards, dedication and good company.

## Travelling Exhibition on the ABC

**"Music is extremely important to me and the ABC has many different ways of presenting music... The ABC gives a chance to new, struggling artists in music, film, TV and comedy. These are reasons young people tune in."**

Mary Neil is one of ten posters in FABC's Travelling Exhibition on the ABC: *THE ABC – It's OURS, It's INDEPENDENT and its FREE*, an exhibition about the ABC as seen through the eyes of Australians from different walks of life. An information sheet on the display is available. Please contact FABC to borrow the exhibition for libraries, festivals and other places the public frequents.

The exhibition will be on free public display 24 hours a day 15–29 Dec (including public holidays) at The Atrium in Federation Square.



## Notices

### FABC Notices

#### Help FABC to keep you informed

Due to postal costs, FABC mailouts to its full membership are generally limited to three a year when we post *News + Views*. Between those times, notices are sometimes posted or emailed to members who have registered their interest in particular events, for example, film evenings.

By completing FABC's help form you can tell us of your interests and of any ways you may be able to assist. If you have not already completed FABC's help form (sent to all members last year and new members when they join), please request the form by email, or phone FABC's office where someone can complete it with you in only a few minutes.

You can also stay informed by subscribing to free email updates at [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au).

#### Fundraising ideas

FABC is seeking fundraising ideas and people who like to organise fundraising and/or social events. We would like to establish a small working group. If you think you can help, please contact FABC office.



**Chris Masters  
Guest Speaker  
2009 AGM**

### **Investigative Journalism: Why we need it. Why it is endangered.**

Fri 11 December, 2009  
Iwaki Auditorium, ABC Southbank  
Meeting 6.45 for 7.00 pm start  
Guest Speaker 8.00pm – public welcome

#### FABC membership – renew now

Your membership is important to FABC – to protect the ABC and to keep it commercial-free. A reminder notice will accompany this newsletter if your membership is overdue. Please help us by renewing promptly.

#### Friends Officers

PRESIDENT: David Risstrom // VICE-PRESIDENT: Gael Barrett // SECRETARY: Georgina Simmonds // MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Pam Caven // TREASURER: Peter Monie // CAMPAIGN MANAGER/EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Glenys Stradijot // ADMIN OFFICER: Elizabeth Pull

#### Friends Newsletter

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#### [www.fabc.org.au](http://www.fabc.org.au)

WEBSITE MANAGER: Peter Monie

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#### Useful contacts

The Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Prime Minister, Parliament House, Canberra 2600

ABC – phone: (03) 9626 1500, GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001  
Maurice Newman – Chairman, ABC Board;  
Mark Scott – ABC Managing Director