

Democracy in Australia – The public broadcasters in Australia

Funding

The public broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), play a crucial role in Australian society, one that is especially significant due to the concentration of media ownership in Australia. Despite strong and consistent public support, funding levels have fallen dramatically in the past 30 years.

The public broadcasters provide daily independent radio, television and online news content. This role is recognised and respected by a great majority of Australians. Opinion polls show that 82 per cent of Australians think the ABC is doing a good job (Newspoll, 2002), that 89% of Australians continue to believe that the ABC provides a valuable service to the community, and that 50% believe it provides a “very valuable” service (ABC Annual Report, 2007). A large number of Australians (60 per cent) also support increases in the ABC’s budget through government funding. A Newspoll survey found that only 2 per cent believed that funding should be less (Newspoll, 2002). Despite continued public support for the ABC, governmental funding continues to be inadequate. In 2006, the Howard Government enlisted the services of independent consultants KMPG to review the adequacy of the ABC funding. As a result of the KMPG report, the Howard Government agreed to provide the ABC with an additional \$88.2 million over the 2006-09 triennium. Although this was significant, it was not the amount requested in the ABC Triennial Funding Submission “to sustain its existing range, quantity and mix of programming and services” (see ABC Annual Report 2006) nor did it match the funding recommended in the KPMG report.

YEAR	ABC PROGRAMMING FUNDS
2005–06	\$625 million
1985–86	\$889 million

Source: ABC Annual Report 2005, p.56
http://www.abc.net.au/corp/annual_reports/ar05/pdf/ABC_AR05_Complete.pdf

The table above shows that the ABC had almost \$250 million more funding in 1985 than it received in 2006 (adjusted for inflation). Put another way, the ABC’s funding decreased by 29.7 per cent over this period. This is a huge reduction. Channel 9’s budget is over three times the ABC’s TV budget per station. The increasing discrepancy between public and commercial broadcasting budgets in recent years further strengthens the case about under-funding for the ABC. Furthermore, the BBC, the British public broadcaster, gets almost five times the ABC’s funding on a per capita basis.

Since 2005/2006, funding for public broadcasting has increased somewhat. ABC funding under the Rudd Government has increased, with the addition of increased operation and project funds. Base funding is scheduled to increase to \$698.7 million in 2009-10, \$716.0 million in 2010-11 and \$725.8 million in 2011-12. Significant project funds have been allocated but these come with substantial new responsibilities. The provision of funds for crucial news and current affairs programming and Australian drama production must be given special priority as public broadcasters grow and change.

The SBS, the ABC’s sister public broadcaster, also plays a vital role in Australia bringing programmes to Australia’s ethnic minorities as well as broadcasting other high quality material for general viewers. The Rudd Government

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allocated an additional \$20 million dollars over three years to the SBS for additional drama content but SBS will need to continue to rely on advertising for some of its income.

Board positions

The Howard Government abolished the statutory position of a staff-elected director of the ABC Board and made several appointments that were criticised as politically rather than merit driven.

Importantly the Rudd Government has developed guidelines for merit-based appointments to the boards of the ABS and SBS. Minister Conroy announced that the Government intended to introduce legislation in 2009 which would entrench merit based selection, and reinstate the position of staff elected board member. While at November 2009 no legislation has been introduced, an independent nomination panel has been established to assess potential candidates for the ABC and SBS boards and provide the minister with a short list of candidates for each vacancy. The first appointments have been made under this new system.

Advertising

For some time the SBS has included paid advertising between programs to cover funding shortfalls. In 2006, SBS board members reinterpreted the legislation which allows the SBS to screen paid advertising in “natural program breaks” to mean during as well as between programs.

In September 2009, Greens Senator Scott Ludlam introduced a Bill into federal parliament that would allow SBS-TV to run advertisements between programs only.

Sources

Guidelines for Appointments to ABC and SBS Boards

http://www.dbcde.gov.au/__data/assets/text_file/0008/89360/Guidelines_Appointments_to_ABC_SBS_Boards.rtf

Friends of the ABC

<http://www.friendsoftheabc.org/media-releases/abc-board-appointments-the-usual-suspects>

Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy Media Release

http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media_releases/2009/018

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