

Australian Democrats Response to Friends of the ABC Survey July 2004

Funding for the ABC

The Democrats have been very concerned that funding cuts to the ABC threatened its viability and its ability to fulfil its charter. Since 1985, its funding has fallen 30%, under both Labor and Coalition Governments, with the biggest cut in the first Budget of the Howard Government.

The broadcaster's funding has been cut far more than any other major area of government expenditure. The BBC receives almost 10 times the funding of the ABC for only 3 times the population of Australia.

In 2003, ABC management was forced to scrap digital multi-channelling programs FLY TV and ABC Kids; and other key programming like Behind the News and current affairs. ABC's Australian drama and comedy programming is well below the Australian broadcasting Authorities commercial free to air broadcasters quota.

The Democrats have repeatedly called for funding to be restored, and have supported ABC's triennial budget submissions (*see attached "Democrats 2004-5 Communications Budget Statement for further information*)

Will your party provide increased funding for the ABC so that it can fulfill its unique role as the national broadcaster?

Yes! The Democrats have repeatedly called for ABC funding to be restored to enable it to meet its Charter in the 21 century. For example at this year's budget the Australian Democrats called for additional \$60 million for the ABC to establish 'ABC independent', multi-channel and broadband services, extend transmission of radio services, extend regional programming, meet increased costs and pay out the remaining \$12 million debt left over from the Jonathon Shier era.

Appointments to the Board of the ABC

The Democrats have always stated that appointments to the ABC Board should be based on merit and proven qualifications and experience, and not on political affiliations or perspective.

In 1999 the Australian Democrats moved a private member's Bill to stop the ABC board from being stacked with government 'mates', and instead by based on merit and proven qualifications and experience

Would your party introduce a change to the method of making appointments to the ABC Board to eliminate or reduce the incidence of political appointments?

Yes! The Australian Democrats will continue to push provisions outlined in our 1999 Private Members Bill to ensure that the ABC Board appointments are based on merit and proven qualifications and experience.

Freedom from political interference

The Australian Democrats have been strong advocates for the ABC to remain free from political interference and have been publicly critical whenever political interference has occurred. The global trend towards concentration of media ownership, particularly in

Australia, makes the maintenance of the national broadcasters - ABC and SBS - free from government interference, and independent from commercial influences – even more important. The Democrats believe the ABC must be free from government interference so they can meet their Charters.

Will your party ensure that the ABC is protected from political interference so that its investigative journalists can fearlessly but fairly uncover information of public interest?

Yes the Australian Democrats will ensure that the ABC is protected from political interference so that they can provide independent news and current affairs. We believe the ABC's independence is vital to Australia in an environment where concentration of media ownership is occurring and Governments are becoming more dishonest.

Implications of the Free Trade Agreement with the USA. Does your party feel that the proposed Free Trade Agreement with the USA will have any detrimental effect on public broadcasting or on Australian multi-media industries?

The Democrats have serious concerns about the impact of the FTA on Australian cultural industries. We strongly support the Australian cultural sector, and will resist any attempts to weaken our strong and vibrant national cultural identity.

Australia has a system of controls in place to ensure that a basic minimum level of Australian content is broadcast on television. Our cultural policy exists to ensure a diverse range of local voices is heard and uniquely Australian stories continue to be told.

The FTA does include provisions for quotas of Australian content on television. However, these quotas are locked at specific levels, and can never be increased. If quota levels are lowered by a future government, they can never be returned to their current levels.

Further, the FTA provides that the US can challenge any regulation for Australian content in new media, which will severely limit future government regulatory options that may be required to deal with new technologies and new modes of delivery of audiovisual content.

The Democrats remain very concerned that the FTA may have an impact on Australian public broadcasting through the ABC and SBS. Funding arrangements for our national broadcasters will not be affected, because Commonwealth subsidies and grants are specifically excluded from the Agreement. However, the definition of 'public services' in the FTA is ambiguous and untested, and excludes services provided on a commercial basis or in competition with other service providers. Given that SBS advertising and ABC product marketing operate in a competitive, commercial environment, any regulation to do with these services may not be covered by the 'public services' exemption. This may mean that the US could challenge some regulation of public broadcasting, claiming it is inconsistent with the USFTA.

Protection against calls for advertising on the ABC

The Democrats have had ongoing concerns that the Government have continued to refuse to rule out advertising and sponsorship on the ABC. For 71 years, the ban on ABC advertising has allowed the national broadcaster to develop and present programs without fear or favour. It doesn't sell junk food to children and cars to adults.

In 2000 the Democrats initiated a senate inquiry into advertising and sponsorship that would have compromised the ABC's independence. And it will.

Will your party work to ensure that the ABC remains free of commercial advertising?

The Democrats will oppose any attempt to force the ABC to rely on advertising or commercial sponsorship for funding, as this will compromise the ABC's integrity.

Support for SBS as well as the ABC

As stated in our Communications policy and our "public broadcasters" issue sheet, the Australian Democrats believe that the ABC and SBS are critical to Australia's media mix. The ABC and SBS provide a significant source of programming which is independent, innovative and reflects the diversity of cultures in Australia. The Australian Democrats are committed to keeping the ABC and SBS strong, independent and viable. We believe that the ABC and SBS have different roles to play in the mix of Australian broadcasting services and should remain independent and separate.

Will your party ensure that the Special Broadcasting Service fulfils its charter by educating Australians about cultures within our borders and overseas.

Yes! The Democrats fully support the unique role of SBS. SBS has been critical in the role it plays in bringing about a sense of multicultural understanding and increased awareness of the diversity of cultures in the wider community through all its programs and services. The Democrats believe that SBS should remain strong, independent and viable.

Commitment to children's programs

The Australian Democrats are fully committed to children's programs on the ABC, recognizing that the ABC have had some of the most successfully children's programs in Australia including *Banana in Pajamas*, *Playschool*, and the now cancelled *'Behind the News'*.

Will your party provide sufficient funds for the ABC to produce high quality children's programs and to restore programs such as *Behind the News* and *Fly*.

The Democrats were publicly outraged when the ABC were forced to cut the digital programs *'Fly TV'* and *'ABC kids'*, watched by more than 800,000 young Australians, and *Behind the News*. The Democrats would provide funding to restore these programs. For example in the lead up to this year's budget the Democrats called for increased funding to enable the ABC to renew its digital programming including re-commencement of *'ABC Kids'*.

8. Commitment to Australian drama. Will your party provide the ABC with sufficient funds to remain a producer of high quality Australian drama?

The Australian Democrats remain committed to the production of Australian Drama. Production of Australian Drama is crucial as Australia is increasingly bombarded with American TV shows and movies. Australian Drama is important to ensure that our culture is preserved and that uniquely Australian stories continue to be told.

In the lead up to this year's budget for example the Democrats called for additional funding to establish *'ABC Independent'*, a commissioning trust fund to invest fund solely within Australian independent production sector. ABC independent would enable the production of an additional 29.5 hours of quality, first-run Australian drama and comedy each year.

Commitment to Radio Australia. Will your party provide sufficient funds for Radio Australia to provide a valuable service within the Asia Pacific region?

The Australian Democrats support the important role that Radio Australia plays in the region and would continue to provide funding to maintain its service in the Asia Pacific region.

Increased funds for digital technology

The Democrats were outraged when the ABC were forced to cut the digital programs 'Fly TV' and 'ABC kids', watched by more than 800,000 young Australians. In the lead up to this year's budget the Democrats called for increased funding to enable the ABC to start providing quality content to Australian Audiences via new digital platform (broadband and multi-channel). Including services for ABC Kids Digital, ABC News and Information Digital, and Triple J Broadband, dependent on funding. The Democrats fought to allow the ABC and SBS to use digital television to provide additional channels and have channels free of licence charge. The government and opposition voted together to severely restrict the types of datacasting and multi-channelling services the national broadcasters can offer

Will your party ensure that the ABC has sufficient funds to introduce digital technology and new media?

As called for in the lead up to this years budget, the Australian Democrats would increased funding for multi-channelling and datacasting.

Support for regional stations and regional production. Will your party maintain the National Interest program and recognise the important role that the ABC plays in regional Australia? Will your party ensure the expansion of NewsRadio into regional centers?

The Australian Democrats have a long history of supporting regional stations and regional productions. We believe it is critical that communities have the opportunity to be represented by local voices and views and hear local stories and news. We are concerned for example that currently, over a million Australian's in regional, areas of Australia do not yet have access to ABC 'national' networks, especially Triple J and ABC NewsRadio.

In the lead up to this year's budget the Australian Democrats called for additional funding to extend transmission of radio networks; enable the ABC to broadcast an additional 78 hours of extra program annually to regional areas; and called on the Government to commit to renewing the National Interest Initiatives Program (NII) post 2004/05 budget. The NII has allowed the ABC to introduce new programs and services in regional and rural Australia. Commitment to the funding beyond next financial year, will give the ABC the certainty required for the future delivery of these services.

12. Support for the full suite of ABC network services. Will your party ensure that the ABC is provided with sufficient funds to continue all its network services including ABC TV, Local Radio, Radio National, Classic FM, Triple J, News Radio and ABC Online?

As demonstrated by our calls for additional funding to the ABC in this year's budget across a range of ABC services, the Australian Democrats strongly believe adequate support must be provided across a suite of services if the ABC is to play the proper role

intended for a public broadcaster in a modern democracy.

What is your personal view on the role played by the ABC in the Australian community and how do you see it developing in the future?

The Australian Democrats view the media as a fundamental player in Australia's democracy, culture and community interaction. Public national broadcasters such as the ABC are critical to Australia's media mix. The ABC has been a vital source of independent news, current affairs, information programs and local drama. It also provides state, local and international perspectives on news and current events which are not shown on nationally networked programs.

The global trend towards concentration of media ownership, particularly in Australia, makes the maintenance of the national broadcasters - especially the ABC - free from government interference, and independent from commercial influences - even more important. The Democrats oppose the privatization of the ABC. The Government has continued to refuse to rule out advertising and sponsorship on the ABC. For 71 years, the ban on ABC advertising has allowed the national broadcaster to develop and present programs without fear or favour. It doesn't sell junk food to children and cars to adults.

Instead the Australian Democrats believe that funding needs to be restored for the ABC to adequately fulfill its Charter and to take advantage of the opportunities that multi-channeling and datacasting can provide in meeting the Charter. We also strongly believe that legislation needs to be implemented to ensure that ABC board members are independent and that there is no political interference in its operations.

The Australian Democrats are committed to keeping the ABC strong, independent and viable.

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS – PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY BROADCASTING BUDGET

APRIL 2004

The Australian democrats view the media as a fundamental player in Australia's democracy, culture and community interaction. Critical to Australia's media mix is well funded public and community broadcasting. Public and Community broadcasting are a significant source of programming which is independent, innovative and reflects the diversity of cultures in Australia.

In financial years 2003/4 and 2004/5, the Federal Government is on track to receive over \$260 million in additional revenue from the sale of commercial radio licences. Yet, despite this massive financial windfall, the public and community broadcasting sector remained starved of funds. The Democrats propose that the funds raised from the sale of commercial broadcasting licences be placed into a **Public and Community Broadcasting Development Fund**, and allocated over the next four years to key initiatives to develop and expand the public and community broadcasting sectors. These include:

Additional funds to the ABC

The ABC is one of the country's most important cultural institutions, and an important part of our democracy. It provides a lifeline to regional Australia, informed current affairs reporting, vital contributions to Australia culture and provision of Australian content. Since 1985, ABC funding has fallen 30%, under both Labor and Coalition Governments, with the biggest cut in the first Budget of the Howard Government. The BBC receives almost 10 times the funding of the ABC for only 3 times the population of Australia.

In 2003, ABC management was forced to scrap their digital multi-channelling programs FLY TV and ABC Kids; and other key programming like Behind the News and current affairs. ABC's Australian drama and comedy programming is well below the Australian Broadcasting Authorities commercial free to air broadcasters quota

Additional funding must be provided if the ABC is to play the proper role intended for a public broadcaster in a modern democracy. Funding should be provided to:

Establish 'ABC Independent', a commissioning trust fund to invest fund solely within Australian independent production sector. ABC independent would enable the production of an additional 29.5 hours of quality, first-run Australian drama and comedy each year.

Enable the ABC to start providing quality content to Australian Audiences via new digital platform (broadband and multi-channel). Services could include ABC Kids Digital, ABC News and Information Digital, and Triple J Broadband, dependent on funding.

Extend transmission of radio networks. Currently, over a million Australian's in regional, areas of Australia do not yet have access to ABC 'national' networks, especially Triple J and ABC NewsRadio.

Enable ABC to broadcast an additional 78 hours of extra program annually to regional areas.

Offset the increased cost of broadcasting and program making, which are increasing at a faster rate than the indexation of the ABC base rate funding.

Funding the outstanding \$12 million debt on redundancies from the Jonathon Shier era. The Shier restructuring, actively encouraged by the Government, did enormous financial and organisational damage to the ABC. Funding the debt would allow the ABC to reallocate \$12 million of core funding back into programs and services.

The Democrats also call for the Government to commit to renewing the National Interest Initiatives Program (NII) post 2004/05 budget. The NII has allowed the ABC to introduce new programs and services in regional and rural Australia. Commitment to the funding beyond next financial year, will give the ABC the certainty required for the future delivery of these services.

Additional funds to SBS

SBS has been critical in the role it plays in bringing about a sense of multicultural understanding and increased awareness of the diversity of cultures in the wider community through all its programs and services.

The Democrats support SBS bid for additional funding to enhance radio services, allowing more language groups to be represented, and expanding coverage to regional areas.

The Democrats also support SBS request for funding to compete in multi-platform, new technology environment, including the development of broadband delivery. The Democrats also support additional funding to the highly successful SBS Independent production house, whose production "Harvey Krumpet" won an Academy Award this year.

While the Democrats support SBS's call to fund additional free-to-air digital channels, the Democrats believe the priority in the first instance should be to fund multi-channelling for the ABC, which it was forced to shut down in July 2003.

Additional funds for Community Broadcasting

The Democrats believe that a democratic, cohesive, multicultural society can only be maintained and developed if all Australians achieve equality in access to services and opportunities in Australia. Community broadcasting plays a critical role in achieving this by providing a vital source of independent programming delivered to ethnic specific and local audiences, and specialized information unavailable elsewhere.

Community broadcasting brings programming diversity, media access, and the opportunity for training in broadcast skills to all Australians. The sector is essentially self-funding, but government support remains a vital catalyst for sector development and allows the production of specialist program content to meet community needs.

Despite partial indexation, the Australian Government assistance for community broadcasting development has declined in real terms by 6% since the introduction of targeted funding in 1996/97. Yet the sector has grown by almost two thirds over the same period. Additional funding should be provided for:

Further program development, which despite approximately 79% of community radio being produced locally, funding hasn't been increased in a decade.

Training development. The training development fund is recognised as a vital training ground for the broadcasting community.

Infrastructure development & transmission access. Almost 200 new community radio licences have been made available since the last major government increase in funding, yet funding on a per station basis has fallen by more than 40%. Transmission costs have also risen since National Transmission Network was privatised in 1999.

COSTINGS

The spending initiatives outlined below are in addition to current core funding

Spending Initiatives 2004-05

ABC Additional Spending initiatives

Core cost increases & local television production	13
Independent production	11
Digital broadband and multi-channelling	6
Radio service transmission	18
Paying out Shier-era debts	12

ABC Subtotal \$60m

SBS Additional Spending initiatives

SBS Radio	8.8
Innovation funding, strategic partnerships and broadband development	1.2
SBS Independent	2.0

SBS Subtotal \$12m

Community broadcasting Additional Spending initiatives

Programming	3.0
Training, Infrastructure development & transmission access	6.0

Community Broadcasting Subtotal \$9m

Total Additional funding \$81m

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