

August Letters

Daily News Monday 11 August, 2003

With reference to the recent round of program cuts to the ABC, Senator Alston (5 August) is reported as saying "These budgetary decisions will have minimal impact on core programming." What exactly is non-core about "Foreign Correspondent", "Behind the News" and "The World at Noon"? Surely his comments are "dripping with sarcasm" and further proof that he is biased against the ABC.

Neville Jennings
Kingscliff, NSW

Daily News 12 August, 2003

Our local member and Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has made some positive moves on behalf of children. His department has taken positive steps to address the issue of child obesity and Mr Anthony has continued his practice of helping students to learn about current affairs and the processes of government by visiting local schools (Daily News 8/8/03).

In the meantime his ministerial colleagues have so restricted funding to the ABC that it has cut quality children's programs such as Fly and Behind the News. The latter program has helped to inform generations of students about current affairs. The axing of programs like this will help to produce a compliant citizenry, with little knowledge of current skills and few skills to critically analyse the media - including the ABC.

It is surely time for parents, teachers and students to let Mr Anthony and Senator Alston know that the ABC needs proper funding, so that it can produce high quality children's shows and provide cadetships for aspiring journalists, as it did so well in the past.

Neville Jennings
Kingscliff
Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC

Response from Larry Anthony (Daily News, 15 August, 2003)

MP Calls on ABC to explain

Thank you Neville Jennings (ABC fund cuts impact on kids DN 12/8/03) for your kind comments about my achievements as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

I share Neville's concern about the decision to cut the Behind the News program. However this was a decision of the ABC Board not the Federal Government. To ensure the ABC remains politically independent the Government provides funding for the ABC but has no power in relation to operational matters.

Behind the News (BTN) is an Australian institution. Operating for more than 34 years it attracts an audience of 1.3 million viewers per week and only costs \$800,000 for 35 half-hour episodes. Comparatively the ABC drama MDA costs more than \$17 million for 44 episodes and only attracts between 500,000 to 600,000 viewers.

The decision to axe BTN is even harder to accept given the spending patterns of ABC executives who have spent more than \$500,000 in the past 18 months attending international conferences.

In 2003-04 the Federal Government will fund the ABC more than \$740 million on behalf of the Australian people.

The Australian people are clearly not happy about the decision to axe education programs while retaining lifestyle and comedy programs, typically the domain of commercial networks.

It is time the ABC explained their decision-making processes to the general public or, better still, reverse their decision.

LARRY ANTHONY
Federal Member for Richmond

Response to Larry Anthony sent to the Editor of the Daily News

It is gratifying to note that Larry Anthony (DN 15/8/03) shares widespread community concern about the ABC's decision to cut the "Behind the News" program that is so important to the development of an informed citizenry. This is just one of many program cuts that Senator Alston claimed would have minimal impact on core programming.

Regarding Mr Anthony's point about the cost of producing local drama, it is true that programs like MDA and The Shark Net are costly to make but this simply underlines the fact the ABC needs to be properly funded. I hope that Mr Anthony is not suggesting that the ABC should leave the production of local drama to the commercial stations. Over the years it has been in the forefront of quality drama production and has trained many of those professionals who fled to the commercial channels during the Shier era.

Regarding the allegations of over-spending by ABC executives and presenters, it is worth noting that spurious allegations about high profile presenters Robyn Williams and Indira Naidoo have already been publicly refuted. If there are instances of waste, these are matters for the ABC Board - most of whom have been appointed by the Coalition and have little expertise in broadcasting. If their expertise is in management then they should manage. The Friends of the ABC have argued for more than a decade that the process of making appointments to the Board should be taken out of the political arena.

It is regrettable that ABC management felt so pressured by budgetary constraints that it cut programs like BTN and cut funding for cadetships. We are lucky to have a local member who takes seriously issues these affecting young people. Unfortunately he is aligned with a group in Canberra who consistently fail to support the national broadcaster.

Neville Jennings
Kingscliff,
Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC