

## **LETTERS and MEDIA RELEASES**

Below are some letters sent recently to the local and national press on ABC issues. Branch members are invited to post letters on this site by sending a letter to:

[njenning@scu.edu.au](mailto:njenning@scu.edu.au)

### **Media Release on Potential Threats to the Integrity of the ABC 3/5/03**

On Wednesday 7 May, Friends of the ABC will meet in Lismore to discuss three potential threats to the integrity of the national broadcaster. These threats involve projected funding cuts, contentious appointments to the ABC Board and the negative implications of free trade agreements.

Neville Jennings (President of the Northern Rivers Branch of the Friends of the ABC) said today: "As the Federal Treasurer puts the final touches to this year's budget, our members are concerned that the cost of the war in Iraq will be used as an excuse for denying the ABC its reasonable request for additional funding. Our members are also alarmed by the way in which appointments are made to the ABC Board. A case in point is the recent appointment of a person described as 'a hardline, right-wing cultural warrior'. Finally our members feel that the signing of a general GATS agreement, or a bilateral free trade agreement with the USA, will have serious implications for the level of Australian content in our media outlets and for the local TV and movie industry as whole".

These issues will be discussed at Wednesday night's meeting, following a brief AGM to be held at 7.30 pm. The venue is the Lismore Workers' Club.

"We welcome new members who share a concern for the integrity of the national broadcaster in all its varied forms", Mr Jennings added.

### **Media Release on Election of Officers and Free Trade**

The AGM of the Northern Rivers branch was held on May 7. The election of officers was as follows:

President: Neville Jennings

Vice President: Doug Myler

Secretary: Brian Whelan

Treasurer: Ed Bennett

Committee; Betty and Alf Walker, Tony Betts, Judy Felix

Interim Sub –branch Convenors: Byron Bay (Jill Keogh), Nimbin (John Knight)

Following the formal Meeting we discussed three issues: funding for the ABC,

appointments to the ABC Board and the likely impact of a Free Trade Agreement with the USA. With regard to the latter the following media release has been prepared.

### ABC Friends sound alarm on Free Trade Agreement

Friends of the ABC in the Northern Rivers region are calling on Trade Minister Mark Vaile to protect the quality and quantity of Australian content when negotiating a proposed Free Trade Agreement with the USA.

The Trade Minister has been reported as saying that no areas of trade will be exempted from the current discussions. Friends of the ABC argue that local content provisions are too important to be traded away.

They believe that any perceived gains would not make up for the unchecked flow of low-grade overseas material into the local market. There would be serious social and economic effects in Australia - as occurred sixty years ago when American cartels decimated a fledgling movie industry.

Neville Jennings (President of the Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC) said: "The ABC has a particular role to play in broadcasting high-quality, locally-made programs. It has a key role to play in helping Australians to reflect on their national identity. Over the years, the ABC has been an important training ground for the local TV and movie industry".

"Now, due to funding restrictions, the ABC needs to enter into commercial partnerships to produce high quality programs. In a free trade environment the ABC would find it hard to maintain editorial control over the production process. The local industry needs protection for cultural reasons. The local TV and movie industry, and the ABC in particular, has a value to the nation that cannot be measured in simple economic terms. We call on the Trade Minister to treat trade in audio-visual services as a special case", Mr Jennings concluded.

### **Response to an editorial in the Australian Newspaper**

Your editorial on the ABC (May 22) was unfair both to the national broadcaster and its supporters. The Managing Director, Russell Balding, has since rebutted most of the more bizarre claims (May 24-25) but there remain some issues that demand attention.

Firstly you argue that Radio National now appeals "virtually exclusively to the values of ageing urban lefties". On the contrary, there are thousands of Radio National listeners across the northern rivers region of NSW and other regions who fit none of those categories. They are vibrant, creative leaders of local communities who contribute significantly to the development of Australian culture. They are strongly supported by Radio National programs such as "Re-

imagining Utopia". The ABC is simply fulfilling its charter if it serves the needs of minority groups. Who else would do it?

Secondly there is a disparaging comment in your editorial about the Friends of the ABC. Your editorial writer was obviously not aware of our recent meeting in Lismore where Radio National supporters were outnumbered by school and university students keen to learn about "the role of foreign correspondent" from Award-winning journalist Greg Wilesmith. Your editorial purveys a stereotypical view of ABC supporters.

It would be equally easy to suggest that Friends of The Australian reside in right wing think tanks and corporate board rooms, but this would be equally untrue. You obviously have some readers who don't get past the sports and business pages but when people do consult the editorial section, they expect to see balanced and informed opinion. Your editorial on May 22 did not meet those criteria.

As far as the ABC is concerned, what other media organisation commands the loyalty of such diverse groups as children watching FLY, young people listening to Triple J and music lovers listening to Classic FM. The Friends of the ABC are not against change and are just as concerned as ABC management that the federal budget has curtailed plans to expand its digital technologies and regional programming.

Neville Jennings (Kingscliff, NSW)  
President, Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC

### **Response to a letter in the Daily News (A Tweed District newspaper)**

The comments by Billy Soo-Lee (Daily News, 10 June) cannot go unchallenged. While claiming to be a "friend" of the ABC, your letter-writer does the corporation a gross disservice. With "friends" like this, who needs enemies?

On the Tampa issue, your correspondent seems to bemoan the fact that the ABC and other media outlets exposed misleading claims by the government that were clearly designed to gain political advantage. Without their clever investigations, how else would we have known?

In the lead-up to the recent Iraq war, the majority of Australians had serious misgivings about our involvement. Even in the Tweed District, we saw well-attended rallies. It was incumbent on the media to report the public's dissatisfaction. When the war actually began, programs like the 7.30 Report broadcast comments on a daily basis from a panel of independent defence experts. While the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq remains a matter of conjecture, the fact that the Australian public knows about atrocities in

Iraq and elsewhere can be attributed directly to excellent documentaries on the ABC in programs such as Four Corners and Foreign Correspondent.

The suggestion that "the funding problems of the ABC are all of their own making" is clearly ludicrous. The ABC makes a small income from its sales through ABC shops. Otherwise it is totally reliant on the whims of the government. This was illustrated in the last federal budget when requests for increased funding to expand digital technology and regional services were denied. No doubt, just before the next election there will be another round of pork-barrelling to curry favour with particular electorates.

In an era when the official opposition is obsessed with leadership struggles and afflicted by a policy hiatus, we need the national broadcaster and other media outlets to ask the tough questions - to expose the rorts. If that means ruffling a few feathers, so be it. In my view the ABC does a brilliant job in providing such a broad, balanced and informative service across a whole range of media (ABC Online, News Radio, ABC Classic FM and Triple J, Radio National, ABC TV and regional stations).

As far as moulding public opinion goes, all media outlets do this consciously or unconsciously by the very act of reporting of the news. The ABC just happens to have a team of very alert and professional journalists who give voice to alternative views. What's interesting to note is that politicians of all persuasions listen assiduously to programs like AM, PM and News Radio and watch the 7.30 Report because they know that's where the action is.

If the ABC has a bias, it is a bias towards being fiercely independent.

Neville Jennings  
President, Northern Rivers Friends of the ABC