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The Hon Simon Finn, MP,  
Chairman,  
The Broadcast of Parliament Select Committee,  
Parliament House,  
Brisbane QLD

Dear Mr Finn,

**Draft Conditions for Media Access to the Parliamentary Precinct**

On behalf of the ABC's News Division, I am writing to raise some serious concerns we have about proposed changes to the Parliamentary broadcasting system. The ABC's concerns relate to the proposal to replace the television networks' own cameras in the Legislative Assembly Chamber with fixed cameras controlled by the Parliament, only allowing the media to use their own audio and visual recording devices with the Speaker's permission, for special events or in the first week of a new parliament for file footage.

The ABC believes this proposed change has implications for the freedom of an independent media to make decisions about how it covers the political process in Queensland.

As the Committee would know, the ABC is an independent national broadcaster. Its independence is enshrined in the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*, which requires the Board of the ABC to maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC, and that the ABC develop and maintain an independent news service. Accordingly, the ABC must exercise editorial control in relation to the content of its programs, particularly in relation to news and current affairs. The ABC's News Division believes that the proposal before Parliament, if implemented, will undermine the ABC's editorial control, and thus its independence.

One of the ABC's roles is to contribute to the democratic process and to serve the public interest by covering political debates, decisions and processes federally and in every state and territory in Australia. The ABC has a long tradition of this coverage in Queensland. A key part of that reporting process is gathering audio visual material for television news programs.

For many years, the ABC and other news organisations have had access to the floor of the Legislative Assembly to record pictures and sound for its television news bulletins. The stations usually share the news-gathering process, by contributing cameras and operators on a pool basis. This system has worked well: it has not been abused, and all networks adhere to the strict Parliamentary rules governing the practice.

The changes proposed by the Committee would allow for the Parliamentary Service to use fixed cameras in the House to provide two feeds to the television networks. This would mean that the media would no longer control the audio visual material recorded in Parliament. Instead, it would be the responsibility of Parliamentary officers. This raises perceptions of censorship—that the Parliament is controlling the audio visual information of its own proceedings. The ABC respectfully suggests that these inevitable perceptions will be at odds with the fundamental concepts of media freedom and independence in news-gathering.

Without questioning the potential quality of the material that would be supplied by the Parliamentary Service, or the integrity and skill of the people who would supply it, the fact remains that, under this proposal, a key part of the media's role, namely the ability to choose images and sound, would be taken away from it. This is of particular concern to the ABC, given the statutory independence requirements referred to above.

It is conventional in television news journalism for a reporter and camera operator to work together on choosing shots, and for the journalist to write the script using the pictures they have arranged to shoot. The ABC believes that the public is best served by the current system, where journalists can ask camera staff on the floor of the House for particular and appropriate shots for their stories, while abiding by the Parliament's guidelines. The proposed changes mean that the pictures chosen may not be appropriate and suitable for the story. This would reduce both the quality and independence of the news coverage of the proceedings.

The proposed changes also have a number of specific filming implications:

**Cutaways.** The system being proposed lacks cutaways—the variety of shorter shots used between longer sequences in the editing process—to provide visual continuity. These form an integral part of the ABC's television coverage of Parliament. For example, in one recent week, the ABC's State Political Reporter provided television news packages on each of the three sitting days, using a total of thirty-three different cutaway shots. The proposed system would have provided just three. The ABC submits that at best, the resulting drop in quality would make the coverage look bland, repetitive and heavily reliant on file footage. At worst, it could discourage reporting of the Parliament because a suitable range of audio-visual material (vision), which is essential for television news stories, would not be available.

**Shot selection.** A system which only covers the Member speaking and the opposing front bench does not allow for a situation where the subject of the debate either does not speak or is not on the front bench. If the proposed system was already in place, a number of recent ABC television news stories would have contained no vision of the Member being spoken about, making the story incomplete or possibly even incomprehensible.

**Black Spots.** The proposed system would focus on backbench and independent Members only if they speak. The limitations this would place on the coverage of the proceedings can be demonstrated by a recent instance where a member held up a sign in Parliament but didn't speak. The proposed system would have provided no footage of this Member, and viewers would not have had the opportunity to observe the full range of proceedings in the Chamber. It is generally recognised that fair and accurate reports of proceedings extend to coverage of all activity within the Chamber.

**Shot Variety.** The proposed system will not provide shot variety. By contrast, the ABC's camera operators can provide a wide range of shots from close-ups to long shots, as well as pans, tilts, zooms and pull focuses.

In relation to the suggestion that the fixed cameras would provide coverage of more than just Question Time, the ABC does not believe this is a sufficient reason for the proposed change. In most parliaments around the country, including Queensland's, most newsworthy issues are debated during Question Time. When journalists consider other debates to be newsworthy, they arrange for the cameras to cover them.

The ABC considers that the Queensland Parliament's current media access arrangements facilitate news coverage that is equal to or better than that applying to other Australian parliaments. The ABC submits that it would be regrettable if the Queensland Parliament should change its system to mirror other, inferior media access arrangements that may be used elsewhere in the country. Accordingly the ABC respectfully suggests that the Parliament should maintain the current arrangements in relation to media filming of the Chamber. This will help to ensure that Queensland's vibrant democratic processes are covered appropriately by a robust independent media.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Should the Committee require further information on this issue, ABC representatives are available for that purpose. In particular, the ABC would be happy to attend a meeting with the Committee to discuss the ramifications of the proposal.

Yours sincerely,

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