



Speech by

DESLEY BOYLE

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Hansard 7 December 1999

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): I speak today not only as the member for Cairns but also as a friend of the ABC. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is an institution of great historical, cultural and social importance. Australians know that and they value their ABC and its contribution.

Even those who do not routinely listen to or watch the ABC recognise the essential contribution made to broadcasting by the ABC. For example, polls conducted by Newspoll and AGB McNair reveal 85% support. In a 1996 Taverner survey for the Sydney Sun-Herald, the ABC was rated as the top institution, with 85% of respondents believing the ABC to be a positive influence in Australia today. Submissions were given to the Howard Government's Mansfield review in 1996 from commercial radio and television stations. They reiterated the importance of and balance provided by the ABC and its importance as an Australian institution.

What has happened to the ABC since the election of the Liberal/National coalition Government in 1996 is a sad and sorry story of broken promises and, through budget cuts, serious erosion of the ABC's capacity to deliver. Honourable members of this House may need reminding of the Howard/Alston team's broadcasting policy as they went to the election in 1996. In its policy prior to the election, the coalition maintained that it would continue existing levels of Commonwealth funding to the ABC. It states—

"The Coalition is strongly supportive of Radio Australia's existing services and will ensure that they are not prejudiced or downgraded in any way."

Senator Alston, the then shadow Minister for communications, was asked if the commitment to maintain funding in real terms stood if the budget's bottom line turned out to be worse than claimed by the Labor Government. He replied—

"Absolutely. John Howard's made it very plain that we want to honour all our commitments, and the ABC is a very important part of that."

What a charade that turned out to be. What empty reassurance indeed. What actually happened was that the coalition Government cut the ABC's annual budget by \$66m straight away. That is 12% of its budget—2% in 1996-97 and a further 10% in 1997-98. This cut was much bigger than that sustained by any other area of Government. The budget cuts resulted in a staff cut of 25%. People of considerable skill who had taken pride in their contribution right around Australia and to Australia's image overseas were now unemployed.

The cuts resulted in reduced coverage of Radio Australia—Australia's voice to the Asia-Pacific. I am told that it can now barely be heard on short-wave transmissions in most of Asia. What a short-sighted, silly reduction in light of the events that have occurred in Asia and the importance of us having an opportunity to broadcast the Australian point of view on world news—on events within Asia as well as within Australia.

Importantly, too, program cuts have been necessary—in documentaries, in arts and entertainment, in news, in current affairs and in sport. Very important cuts also have been made to the ABC's capacity to produce Australian quality programs of cultural value and intellectual integrity. Additionally, we see ABC television forced to repeat programs over and over to fill the time. In fact, analysis in March 1999 revealed that first-run Australian content on ABC television has declined to a

meagre 7% when sport, parliamentary broadcasts, late night music video clips and news and current affairs are excluded.

The meaning of these cuts in regional areas is indeed very serious. It may well be that in metropolitan areas of Australia—in the south-east corner of Queensland—the ABC's contribution is not as important as it is in regional areas, and even more so in remote areas such as the Cape York Peninsula. For many in the remote areas of Australia the ABC's radio network is the only coverage they get, and even that is not complete. They rely on ABC Radio for all news. For many areas in northern Australia, ABC television is still the only option. The importance to those people of Radio National programs particularly, as well as local news broadcasts—even if "local" really means regional news broadcasts—in order to stay in touch is a matter of life itself. Cutting these services is indeed disgusting politics.

The cuts have also unfortunately affected another of the ABC's important services, that is, the Triple J radio network. Those who have listened to Triple J will know that it is a station that proudly promotes Australian music—and not just Australian music and Australian musicians who are already recognised and are afforded frequent opportunities by airing on other commercial radio stations and other television outlets. In fact, Triple J has done a very important service to young, new musicians in Australia by playing their first offerings. Not always are these the most sophisticated or likely to be top of the hit parade, but it has provided an opportunity for music in Australia to be heard.

More important than its contribution to the development of contemporary Australian music, however, Triple J as a network has united our young people. It has given young people across Australia the feeling of belonging, of being in touch with other young people—from Broome to Cairns to Thursday Island to Melbourne and into country areas of Tasmania. The budget cutbacks to the ABC have stopped the roll-out of the Triple J network into country areas. The cuts have meant that there is less live concert recording and less of the wonderful Unearthed program. Triple J went out to regional areas and held competitions and concerts for new musicians and "unearthed" talent right around Australia. Unfortunately, Triple J has also had to axe its Internet site. This in itself was important as a means of communication for young Australians. This was most evidenced by the Reach Out program and its attempt to help young people to reach out towards each other rather than to take that dreadful choice in times of desperation of youth suicide.

We have seen favourite programs gone from Radio National, programs such as Saturday National and the Week in Film. We have seen outside broadcasts in regional radio diminish. We have seen local news in regional areas diminish and a reliance on more capital city programs. This is, of course, to our country's detriment. In television, yes, this means fewer Australian documentaries, and that is important; reduced budgets for news, Lateline, Four Corners, Landline, Australian Story; and cutbacks in Compass and the Quantum series. We should be proud of the quality of our news broadcasts and our independent news and current affairs shows. To cut these back is to cut back the very independent communication lifeblood of Australia. And although the ABC was perhaps not providing shows with high ratings, it was providing important coverage of religious ceremonies around Australia. But they, too, have had to be cut.

So what for the future of the ABC with this present Federal Government? Further cuts are threatened next year, and that is my primary reason for drawing honourable members' attention to the Friends of the ABC and their campaign to get the message to the Howard Government and Minister Alston that the cuts have gone too far, and their campaign to ensure that the three new board members who were appointed only several months ago should be there on merit, not because they will be political cronies and will do as the Prime Minister wishes.

Budgets will be set for the ABC early next year. I encourage all members, especially those from rural and regional areas of Queensland, to join the Friends of the ABC, so ably led by Elisabeth McClement in Queensland, to speak out for the importance and for the standards of our national ABC broadcasting.
