

Where's ABC?

Apparently 'non-political' appointments will do nothing to resolve the ABC's identity crisis, writes **Malcolm Colless**.

The Federal Government's re-appointments to the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation put a political showpiece ahead of corporate common-sense. In an attempt to demonstrate that it could go where no other government had gone before—namely depoliticising the ABC board—it turned its back on the opportunity to instill some forensic accounting experience into the governing body of a business with an annual budget of more than \$800m.

This is despite what is believed to have been strong representations along these lines from the ABC Chairman, Maurice Newman, who has been under pressure to accept the reinstatement of the position of 'ABC staff elected director' so that the Government can honour an election campaign commitment to the organisation's unions.

The appointment of long-term arts industry executive, Michael Lynch, a former Australia Council chief executive, and academic and *Griffith Review* editor, Julianne Schultz, followed a lengthy vetting process set up by the Government in what it claimed was necessary to prove transparency. The strength of this argument, pressed by Communications Minister, Senator Stephen Conroy, is unconvincing. But if it was determined to go down this path the Government should have laid out specific requirements that

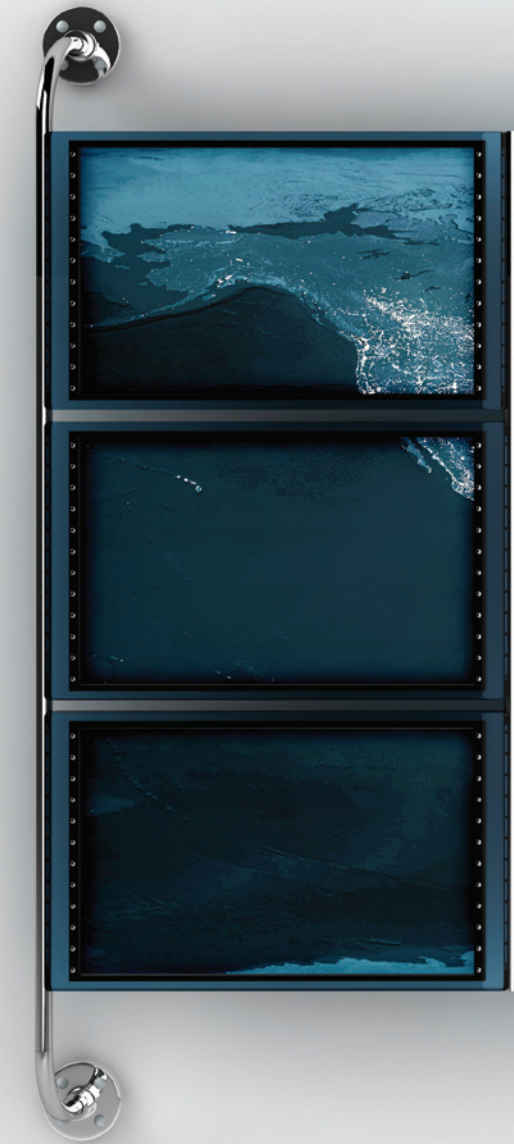
would have brought more financial management grunt onto the board and not (without taking away anything from Lynch or Schultz) an arts infusion.

The selection process involved the appointment, by the head of the Prime Minister's Department, of a seven-member nomination panel to make merit-based recommendations to fill the two vacancies on the ABC board and two on the board of SBS. This drawn out process which left the ABC positions unfilled for nearly a year cost the taxpayer more than \$200,000 to prove a political point which, in the end, required the approval of Conroy, and then the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. A close reading of the Government's policy on this procedure shows that, if the Minister wants to disregard the recommendations of the panel he simply needs the Prime Minister's nod. So what's new?

When it comes to appointing the next chairman of SBS (due at the end of the year) and the ABC in 2012, the ball sits in the Prime Minister's office and again he is under no obligation to accept any recommendation from the nomination panel.

But there is no reason why the Prime Minister shouldn't make these appointments. The issue is about demonstrating good judgement by selecting individuals who can seriously contribute to the running of an organisation with the size and responsibilities of a major private enterprise company.

Prattling on about transparency, public confidence, equal opportunity, and diversity of gender and geographi-



cal representation on these boards only caters for the demands of political correctness from the Left while creating another costly bureaucratic structure.

Meanwhile the ABC is wrestling with a serious identity crisis as it campaigns to convince anyone who will listen—but particularly the Prime Minister—that it is the only organisation equipped both technically and ethically to be Australia's international broadcaster.

ABC management has whipped itself into a frenzy of lobbying activity after Sky News (partially owned by Rupert Murdoch) had the effrontery to contest its control of the country's overseas TV broadcasting service—Australia Television Network.

The ABC beat off a challenge from Sky News in 2005 to retain the right,

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through a five year contract, to deliver this external service. But a departmental review in August will recommend whether this contract should be rolled over for another five years or opened up for tender by other interested parties.

The problem for the ABC is that much has changed since 2005. There is a different Government with a vastly different view about how Australia's, and the Prime Minister's, image should be projected around the world.

John Howard showed little interest in this overseas TV service and seemed content for it to amount to little more than a facility for expats and diplomats in Australian missions, largely around the Asia Pacific region. Unsurprisingly this also seemed to suit the bureaucrats in Foreign Affairs which stomps up the \$19 million a year budget for the service.

But Rudd is keenly interested in the role that this service can play in global public diplomacy as he goes about pursuing his empire building policy vision which includes a new Asia-Pacific strategic community and a temporary seat for Australia on the United Nations Security Council.

The effective use of the media in the area of soft diplomacy was brought into sharp focus during the recent meeting in Canberra between Rudd and the Chinese Propaganda Minister, Li Changchun, which came on the eve of the Prime Minister's departure for Washington and then London for the G20 summit.

Li successfully urged Rudd to lobby other G20 delegates for China to be given more influence within the International Monetary Fund and hence

raise its profile in the battle against the global financial crisis.

Li's travelling media team, which for some inexplicable reason had exclusive access to the meeting between the propaganda minister and the Prime Minister at the Lodge, lost no time in getting the news of Rudd's support for this initiative back to China and then distributed it in Chinese and English with accompanying video images domestically and internationally through television and the internet.

Australia Network had no coverage of this event because it relies totally on the ABC for editorial content and the ABC, along with the rest of the Australian media, were out in the cold on this one.

At the very least this was highly embarrassing for the Australian media.

But it is just one part of a much broader issue concerning the role of broadcasting in the advancement of Australia's international image through public diplomacy.

If this is a sandpit in which we want to, or have to, play then there are two critical questions which must be addressed by the Government: Do the rules of international broadcasting engagement need to be drastically changed and is the ABC the appropriate body to control this service?

ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott, quite rightly points out that the budgets of other national broadcasters, including Australia's partners in the G20, have been massively boosted in recent times with China pumping an additional \$10 billion into its overall media services with a clear focus on capitalising on the benefits of soft diplomacy. As a result Scott has been banging on the Government's door for a significant boost in its commitment to Australia Network and consequently the ABC.

But it would be highly irresponsible and reckless of the Government to throw more money at something which is so ideologically flawed. It must fix the problem first and this lies not just within the sanctified walls of the ABC but also in the Foreign Affairs Department.

In its discussion paper for the recent review of national broadcasting, the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy asked whether Australia's national broadcasters might be deployed to further Australia's cultural, commercial and social links in key Asian markets, particularly those crucial to our future trade and economic development. But the contract which the ABC has with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to deliver the Australia Network service requires it to report the region from an Australian perspective. While this might suit the ABC's ideological bent, shouldn't the real purpose of this service be to project the best of Australia into the region and beyond—a sort of 'brand Australia' network?

Meanwhile hiding behind another clause in the Australia Network contract, which stipulates as a key performance in-



ABC managing director Mark Scott (left), Communications minister Stephen Conroy (centre) and SBS managing director Bruce Meagher in Canberra. AAPImage | Alan Porritt

dicator the existence and application of editorial policies on independence and accuracy, Scott argues that to outsource this international broadcasting service to commercial interests would damage Australia's diplomatic interests.

This suggests a level of probity by our national broadcaster that cannot be matched in the tacky world of commercialism. It ignores the fact that many of the public broadcasting services he wants to emulate on the international scene are commercially underwritten and that Australia Network can itself seek advertising support although not in the areas of news, public affairs or children's programming. This leaves precious little to attract potential advertisers apart from regurgitated soaps and sporting replays.

Meanwhile, in his efforts to beat off the commercial barbarians and extract more money out of the Government, Scott reveals that he is a convert to the benefits of soft diplomacy. Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 20 he said there was a growing appreciation (in international affairs) of the 'role of soft diplomacy using methods such as the sharing of perspectives to deliver policy objectives.'

And only a month before he was quoted in *The Australian* saying, 'There is an agreed understanding that you can't outsource your diplomatic activi-

ties, and you can't outsource them to Rupert Murdoch's international operations. We strongly believe the Australian Government's diplomatic efforts in broadcasting need to be delivered by the Australian Government's public broadcaster.'

While this may be music to the ears of the bureaucrats in DFAT, it is Rudd that Scott has to convince. Does he believe that the ABC can successfully juggle soft diplomacy with its preoccupation for achieving editorial independence?

And while Australia Network is controlled by the ABC will it take programming from the commercial sector to enhance the quality of the overall service? This is most unlikely.

One solution could be to scrap the current contract when it expires in 2011 and set up a new body to run this international service which can draw on the best Australian content at all levels, including what the ABC has to offer, to project the country's image in the region and around the world.

For this to work Rudd would have to shift responsibility away from DFAT into his own office but this shouldn't be too hard. After all, everything in this administration is run out of there anyway.

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