



**PAPER FOR THE PAGE RESEARCH CENTRE**

**REGIONAL AUSTRALIA AND THE ABC:  
REFORMING THE RELATIONSHIP**

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## **INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper was commissioned by the Page Research Centre in August 2021 to evaluate and analyse whether regional Australians are satisfied with, and believe they are getting full value from, the programmes and services of the Sydney-headquartered Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The ABC is an integral part of Australian life. It is an essential part of regional Australia's social and communications infrastructure. It is vital that the ABC is fully responsive to the needs of the entire Australian community regardless of where they live: this means being sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of regional communities, just as much as to those of Australians living in our capital cities.

To inform and complement this paper, the Page Research Centre also commissioned Compass Polling to survey the attitudes of regional Australians to the ABC and to the relevance, reliability and representativeness of ABC programmes and services. It is referred to as the "Page Research Centre survey" throughout this paper.

The findings of the Page Research Centre survey show that, contrary to its self-image and marketing, the ABC is falling short of the expectations of regional Australians.

There is an appetite in Regional Australia for policy and legislation that makes the ABC's leadership and management more sensitive and responsive to its communities and its people, and for driving governments to make sure that the ABC caters for Australians' geographic diversity just as much, and arguably more, than the currently-fashionable social diversity boxes – such as Aboriginality and sexual preference – that ABC management and staff fondly boast they tick.

### **Legislative reforms to make the ABC more relevant and responsive to Regional Australia**

Drawing on legislative attempts in 2015, 2017 and 2019 to make the ABC more responsive and relevant to Regional Australia, this paper recommends that a re-elected Nationals-Liberal Government passes amendments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 that would:

- Recognise that not all Australians live in the major capital cities.
- Amend the ABC Charter to direct the ABC to prioritise the needs and aspirations of Regional Australia as part of its mission as a truly national broadcaster.
- Mandate at least two positions on the ABC Board – which may include the Chairman – having direct personal and/or professional connections with Regional Australia.
- A dedicated ABC Regional Advisory Council be established.

The paper also notes, however, that if legislation cannot be passed, the Prime Minister and Minister for Communications, ideally in consultation with the Minister for Regional Communications, already have the discretion to consider Regional Australia in making appointments to the ABC Board.

Furthermore, the ABC already has the discretion to establish a Regional Advisory Council under its current legislation, but has chosen not to do so. This, however, could be turned into a government directive by amendments to the ABC Act.

### **Creating a new ABC Regional organisation**

Besides supporting the proposed reform measures of the previously unpassed legislation, Part 3 of this paper proposes a further option: giving Regional Australia a separate but complimentary ABC Regional organisation, with its own Charter and infrastructure, dedication to serving Australia's regions.

It would be challenging to implement, but if the other proposed governance reforms are not legislated, and the ABC continues to resist regional-friendly change, it may be the only way to ensure that national broadcasting services are truly national, and not dominated by the mindsets of inner Sydney and Melbourne.

Regardless, the ABC should be encouraged by Government to do more to regionalise its administration and functions. Moving ABC staff from Ultimo to Parramatta does not constitute decentralisation.

### **Findings of the Page Research Centre survey**

Each of these reform proposals were road-tested by the related opinion survey commissioned by the Page Research Centre, and the findings are outlined in Part 4.

Background on the survey is in the Appendix to this paper.

The key findings were remarkable for their consistency. Each of these proposals, including the ABC Regional proposal, were widely supported by respondents, including by gender, age, regionality and educational level.

More remarkable, however, was their popularity across the political spectrum, with supporters of the Left – ABC and Greens – endorsing these proposals as strongly as, if not more strongly than, supporters of the Nationals, Liberals and One Nation.

The survey findings indicate there is a real appetite for reforms making the ABC more relevant and responsive to Regional Australia, should parties and governments pursue them.

### **Purpose of this paper**

The intention of this paper is not to reinvent the wheel.

What it does is review aborted efforts under the Abbott (2015)-Turnbull (2017)-Morrison (2019) governments to legislate ABC structural and governance reforms that would have made the Corporation specifically responsive to the vast regional Australia to which the ABC is so important.

The story of these efforts is told in Part 2 of this paper.

The conclusion, backed by findings of the Page Research Centre survey, is that if there is political will to make the ABC more regionally focused, including by mandating Board and leadership appointments with a specific connection to regional Australia, there are electoral rewards for parties both committing to making the reforms, and for implementing them.

In short, these proposed but so far unimplemented reforms are popular in regional Australia, and parties advocating them would, potentially, obtain electoral benefit.

## **PART 1: THE ABC IS OUT OF TOUCH WITH REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

In her Foreword to the ABC's 2020-21 Annual Report, ABC Chairman Ita Buttrose writes:

Over the years we have continuously increased our commitment and investment in regional communities whenever we've had the opportunity to do so. Today we operate from 48 locations and our local radio network reaches around three million Australians every week.

We work hard at maintaining a deep connection with regional and rural communities, telling personal stories and celebrating life on the land. The resilient and inspirational Australians living outside our major cities help us laugh with their unique good humour.

The ABC's commitment to serving regional Australia and connecting all parts of the nation is unmatched by any other media organisation. In recent months, many local media and news providers have either withdrawn from regional Australia or closed down altogether, so much so that some places are at risk of becoming 'news deserts'. There has been growing pressure on the ABC to fill the gap<sup>1</sup>.

In that comment, Ms Buttrose highlights why it is important that the ABC has an intimate connection to regional Australia, which goes beyond having regional studios, bureaux, and transmitters. As alternative media organisations – newspapers, radio, and television – rationalise or close their coverage and operations, it is imperative that the ABC, as the national broadcaster, compensate for the market failure in regional media markets, so that regional Australians have a choice of news, information, and entertainment comparable to Australians living in capital cities.

But while Ms Buttrose, Managing Director David Anderson and the ABC leadership highlight the quantity of the Corporation's regional infrastructure, and the level of investment in it, that doesn't necessarily reflect the quality of the ABC's regional engagement.

It's worth noting a particular sentence in that quote from Ms Buttrose's commentary: 'The resilient and inspirational Australians living outside our major cities help us laugh with their unique good humour.' It seems to her – and whoever in the Corporation who drafted those words on her behalf – rural Australians are quaint country folk, to be patronised by their sophisticated urban cousins.

It highlights the problem that the ABC has with regional Australia. Its voice and outlook are provided by people from the capital cities, and especially from the inner and eastern suburbs of Sydney, where the ABC's Ultimo headquarters is sited and many of its senior management and production staff, including journalists and producers, live and work.

To these people, outback life is something beyond their first-hand understanding. More to the point, their personal outlooks, and conceptions of what the world should be like, are shaped by who they are and the world in which they move. That world tends to be Left, progressive, Indigenous and Green.

To them perhaps, people who live in regional Australia who aren't Aboriginal, especially those working on the land and in the mining sector, are the Devil's disciples, whether it be for digging up coal (or worse, uranium) or running cattle, sheep and other methane-emitting animals accused of contributing to greenhouse emissions (and, of course, animals are off the inner-city vegan menu!).

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<sup>1</sup> ABC Annual Report 2020-2021, page 2.

## The ABC's conception of diversity

As a statement of the Corporation's priorities, the ABC's Annual Report places great emphasis on diversity and inclusion. "The ABC aims to tell the stories of all Australians – stories that people across the country will recognise and understand," it says<sup>2</sup>.

In its chapter, *Reflecting contemporary Australia*,<sup>3</sup> the Annual Report makes much of the ABC's commitment to diversity and inclusion in its programming and workforce. But when it comes down to the detail, to the ABC contemporary Australia means the voices and stories of women; Aboriginal Australians; people with disabilities; people from non-English-speaking backgrounds; and people who are broadly labelled as "Queer"<sup>4</sup>.

The report is generously illustrated by people and programmes featuring these backgrounds, to highlight its diversity message and signal the ABC's ticking the progressive urban Left's social boxes. This includes congratulating itself on its promotion of "First Nations" peoples, and Aboriginal culture and language, even to the extent of acknowledgments of "country" in its news bulletins and programme credits, and insinuating Aboriginal language into its programmes.

But any inclusion of regional Australians in this vision of diversity is purely coincidental. If you fit into one of these other groups, great. If you don't, you don't rate, unless it's as someone "helping us laugh with their unique good humour."

To the ABC leadership, unless it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living outside the capital cities, it seems that regional Australia is not part of contemporary Australia and, sadly, country yokels to be laughed at and patronised.

In other words, the ABC's structural biases on diversity relate to people's personal characteristics, not the geography of Australian communities. That mindset fails to consider the amazing diversity and richness of Regional Australia, from large regional cities like Ballarat and Mt Isa, to the remotest and most isolated cattle stations and settlements in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The fact that one-third of Australians do not live in inner cities and capital city suburbia doesn't trouble the ABC scorers. Despite everything they claim, ABC leaders reflect an urban broadcaster serving a one-size-fits-all urban television market. Radio is more localised, and specialist music broadcasters ABC Classic and JJJ appeal to universal tastes, but news and current affairs continue to be networked either nationally or, for major news bulletins, from state capitals.

Radio National is, of course, anything but national. Its programme mixes and production values are narrowcast not only in its content, but in its appeal to people "just like us." Consequently, RN doesn't even appeal to metropolitan suburbs, let alone Regional Australia except for *The Country Hour*.

Nevertheless, the ABC is entitled to claim that its interpretation of diversity is consistent with the mandates of its legislated Charter. Arguably, it is. This raises, however, questions about the content of the Charter itself, its relevance to regional Australia, and the public's expectations of the ABC that it confers.

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<sup>2</sup> ABC Annual Report 2020-2021, page 48.

<sup>3</sup> ABC Annual Report 2020-2021, pages 48-53

<sup>4</sup> There is a programme production unit in the ABC called ABCQueer.

Does the ABC 's Charter, originally legislated by a Labor government with Labor values, honestly reflect the true breadth and depth of the Australian nation as a whole? Can it do so if it does not specifically recognise that there is an Australia that exists beyond the capital cities, which can truly be called, as was the fondly remembered ABC TV documentary series of the 1960s and 1970s, *A Big Country*?

### The ABC Charter

Legislated by the Hawke Labor government<sup>5</sup>, the ABC's Charter is set out in section 6 of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983<sup>6</sup>.

It sets out "the functions of the Corporation," and the factors which it is required to consider in providing its broadcasting services within Australia.

Section 6, paragraph 2(a) provides:

- (2) In the provision by the Corporation of its broadcasting services within Australia:
  - (a) the Corporation shall take account of:
    - (i) the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and community sectors of the Australian broadcasting system;
    - (ii) the standards from time to time determined by the ACMA in respect of broadcasting services;
    - (iii) the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized broadcasting programmes;
    - (iv) the multicultural character of the Australian community; and
    - (v) in connection with the provision of broadcasting programmes of an educational nature—the responsibilities of the States in relation to education; and
  - (b) the Corporation shall take all such measures, being measures consistent with the obligations of the Corporation under paragraph (a), as, in the opinion of the Board, will be conducive to the full development by the Corporation of suitable broadcasting programmes.

This boils down to:

- Providing an effective complement to commercial media, and filling gaps in the market where commercial services are weak or absent.
- Providing educational programming to complement school curricula.
- Maintaining standards as set by the Australian Communications and Media Authority; and
- Reflecting the "multicultural character of the Australian community." As noted above, the ABC appears to interpret its diversity mission in accordance with this Charter requirement, broadening it to the "cultures" of favoured population groups, particularly Aboriginals, women, LGBTI, and people with disabilities.

The ABC goes over the top on social, racial and gender diversity, paying homage to the inner-city zeitgeist reflected in much of its original programmes, and in current affairs and discussion programmes such as *7.30* and *The Drum*. Even the supposedly non news and non-ideological *Play School* has gone woke, injecting Aboriginal, environmental, and social progressivism into its presenter mix and programme content.

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<sup>5</sup> Although the Fraser Coalition government would have legislated a similar, and probably identical, Charter, had it been re-elected in March 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Federal Register of Legislation: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00079>



Yet, to be fair, these attitudes are so ingrained in the mindsets of management and staff that the biases they reflect are mostly unconscious rather than deliberate.

It's simply because of the way ABC people think.

To counter such – dare we say – structural bias, and to send a clear message to management and staff, what is lacking is an express legislative mandate to ensure the ABC's services and infrastructure are responsive to, and reflective of, the demographic, social and economic characteristics of regional Australia, and in the absence of that legislative mandate there is no obligation on the ABC's part to prioritise its regional audiences, nor to reflect its characteristics and *geographic* diversity.

This contrasts totally with the Charters of the national broadcasters in New Zealand and Canada, and of the institutional model for them and the ABC, the British Broadcasting Corporation:

**New Zealand:** The TVNZ Charter requires, *inter alia*, the broadcaster to “provide shared experiences that contribute to a sense of citizenship and national identity,” and that to achieve its designated objectives, it is to “feature programmes that reflect the regions to the nation as a whole”<sup>7</sup>.

**Canada:** The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Mandate, contained in the Canadian Broadcasting Act 1991, and mandates, *inter alia*, that “the programming provided by the Corporation should...be predominantly and distinctively Canadian, reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions”<sup>8</sup>.

**United Kingdom:** The BBC Royal Charter, last updated in 2017, is a much more detailed and complex document than the Charters of the ABC, TVNZ, and the CBC. In relation to diversity and regionality, the BBC Royal Charter says the BBC is:

To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom: the BBC should reflect the diversity of the United Kingdom both in its output and services. In doing so, the BBC should accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom today, and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society. It should ensure that it provides output and services that meet the needs of the United Kingdom's nations, regions and communities. The BBC should bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom<sup>9</sup>.

The ABC therefore is an outlier amongst its sister broadcasting corporations, yet resists any attempt to amend its Charter to recognise the importance of the ABC's serving the regions. That is not to say that it does not serve Regional Australia, but rather that the regions are the poor relations in ABC “groupthink,” with no legislative mandate to pressure and compel management and content producers to embrace the regions more enthusiastically and sympathetically.

The Board and management of the ABC can, and do, point to their regional local radio networks, and the vital information roles the ABC plays as an emergency broadcaster in times of fire, flood, and cyclone. It can also point to programming and programmes that have a national significance for all

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<sup>7</sup> TVNZ Charter: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/TVNZ%20Charter.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> CBC Mandate: <https://cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/vision/mandate>

<sup>9</sup> BBC Royal Charter 2017: [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how\\_we\\_govern/2016/charter.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/charter.pdf)

Australians, including regional Australians: a universally appealing but quintessentially Australian programme like *Bluey* is a good example<sup>10</sup>.

But for television and Radio National, generally the regions and regional content are very much the poor relations. Radio National may have programmes appealing to urban Left constituencies like *What the British Stole*, an anti-colonial rant, but beyond the *Country Hour*, there is almost no regional-focused content.

As for TV, there is truly little regional-focused content, and much of what there is plays to an urban audience and what it conceives of their country cousins. Thus, its flagship regional-focused programme remains *Landline*, but it is complemented by programmes like the short documentary series *Back Roads* and the quirky country comedy *Rosehaven*, each of which, in their own ways, portray regional communities and people as offbeat subjects of urban curiosity.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, beyond local radio, regional-focused programming is commissioned and produced almost as an afterthought, rather than an integral part of the ABC's central mission to inform and entertain all Australians.

### **ABC Board and ABC Advisory Council**

Similarly, the ABC Act places no obligation on the Prime Minister and Minister for Communications to consider the regionality of potential appointees to the ABC Board.

Paragraph 12 (5) of the Act sets out relevant attributes for the Chairman and non-executive directors of the Board:

- (5) Before the Governor-General appoints a person as a Director referred to in paragraph (1)(b) or (c):
  - (a) if the appointment is of the Chairperson—the Prime Minister; or
  - (b) if the appointment is not of the Chairperson—the Minister;must be satisfied that the person is suitable for appointment because of:
  - (c) having had experience in connection with the provision of broadcasting services or in communications or management; or
  - (d) having expertise in financial or technical matters; or
  - (e) having cultural or other interests relevant to the oversight of a public organisation engaged in the provision of broadcasting services.

Any consideration of understanding of, or direct connection with, regional Australia is purely at the discretion of the Prime Minister and the Minister. Of the current Board, only one director, Georgie Somerset of Queensland, has a personal and career background outside the capital cities<sup>11</sup>.

The ABC Advisory Council is also established under the ABC Act. Currently it has twelve members, of whom four have direct connections with the regions, and another member with Aboriginal family connections to remote settlements<sup>12</sup>.

The most remarkable feature of the current Advisory Council is not its under-representation of regionality, but its assiduous ticking of diversity boxes according to gender (majority female membership) and ethnicity. There is only one Anglo man among its twelve members.

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<sup>10</sup> Although it is worth noting that the one episode of *Bluey* set in Regional Australia, *Grandad*, depicts locals as slow-talking dimwits.

<sup>11</sup> ABC Board page on the ABC website: <https://about.abc.net.au/who-we-are/the-abc-board/>

<sup>12</sup> ABC Advisory Council page on the ABC website: <https://about.abc.net.au/who-we-are/abc-advisory-council/>

However, section 11 of the Act gives the ABC Board the power to establish additional advisory councils in relation to any State; Territory; or region of Australia. This power currently is dormant: therefore, there is no specific regional advisory council in being.

### **What does the ABC do well for regional Australia?**

While there are clear shortcomings in the relationship between the ABC leadership and regional Australia, it needs to be acknowledged that the ABC does much good in the regions, and its programming and services largely are valued by regional Australians.

From responses to the Page Research Centre survey, things that the ABC does well, and are valued, include:

- ABC local radio, with local coverage of local as well as statewide and national issues and stories.
- ABC emergency broadcasting, invaluable in times of natural disaster including bushfires, floods, and cyclones.
- ABC news and current programming, which are valued in regional Australia despite viewpoints and political biases usually being obviously skewed to the Left. Many respondents said they factored this into their perception of the content and opinions presented.
- ABC music programming filling gaps not well-served by commercial radio, such as JJJ, ABC Classic and ABC Jazz.
- ABC digital platforms, especially the iView streaming service; and
- ABC coverage of sport with a broad appeal, especially football and cricket.

The picture of the ABC, therefore, is by no means all bad. It does many things well. The issue is whether it can better understand and serve regional Australia.

The Page Research Centre survey found that while many regional Australians do not agree with the viewpoints and biases that emerge from ABC programming, but factor these biases into their viewing and listening and, allowing for that, then consider what they see and hear generally dependable<sup>13</sup>.

### **Do regional Australians get full value from the ABC?**

Going by the commentary in its latest Annual Report, the ABC itself says a resounding yes.

Going by the findings of the Page Research Centre opinion survey, however, the picture is not as rosy.

When asked the question, **“Do you think people living in Australia get full value for money from the ABC?”**<sup>14</sup>, 56 per cent of respondents answered no.

This included:

- 60 per cent of female respondents; and 51 per cent of male respondents.
- 55-60 per cent of respondents living in large regional towns and more remote settings<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Page Research Centre survey, Part 2, Question 15.

<sup>14</sup> Part 4, Question 4 of the survey.

<sup>15</sup> The definitions of regionality used in the Page Research Centre survey are outlined in Appendix 1.

- 60-65 per cent of respondents politically affiliated with The Nationals, the Liberal party, and other right-of-centre groupings.
- Greens voters, who could be presumed to be strongly supportive of the ABC, split 50-50; and
- Clear No majorities in every State and Territory.

As will be seen in Part 4, there was also surprisingly strong support across gender, regional and political spectrums for governance reform of the ABC to make it more responsive to the needs and interests of regional Australia, when its corporate mindset is so connected to urban Australia, and to the Corporation's geographic concentration in the capital cities, and in inner Sydney and Melbourne in particular.

Arguably the ABC is more in touch with inner-city Sydney concerns and values than with the regions.

### **Making the ABC more responsive to regional Australia**

The task for future Coalition governments is ensuring the ABC places as much emphasis on the needs and aspirations of regional Australians, as well as on the now-usual "diversity" groups.

The ABC talks about its regional commitment, but is hung up on social, racial and gender diversity rather than geographic diversity.

This isn't helped by the high proportion of its staff being in Sydney and Melbourne. The bulk of these are in the Ultimo head office, with Left politics and social progressivism dominating mindsets and programming and production decision-making.

What the ABC chose to highlight about its performance in its 2020-21 Annual Report promotes its commitment to cultural and social diversity, and Aboriginal Australians, at great length. Yet this self-perception also demonstrates how there is a disconnect between the ABC's perception of itself and how the ABC is perceived in the regions.

Since the election of the current Coalition government in 2013, there have been several attempts at legislative reform to direct the ABC leadership to have greater regard for regional Australia in their planning and decision-making.

Part 2 outlines these attempts, and how they would have altered the governance of the ABC to make the Corporation more engaged with, and responsive to, regional Australia.

## **PART 2: ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS THE ABC'S SHORTCOMINGS TOWARDS REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

The adequacy and level of commitment of the ABC to regional Australia has been a long-standing concern in both the Nationals and the Liberal party.

With most of its operations housed in capital cities, and much of that concentrated in its Sydney Ultimo HQ, there is justifiable concern that the ABC mindset thinks of service planning and delivery in terms of the largely inner-city and affluent capital city suburbs where its key managers, production staff and journalists live and work.

Since the election of the Coalition in 2013, there have been three attempts to address these concerns by legislation.

The first was a 2015 private senator's bill by then backbencher Bridget McKenzie. The others were iterations of the Same Bill, introduced as Government Bills in 2017 and 2019.

None of these three Bills progressed to a vote in either the House of Representatives or the Senate, but their provision remain compelling and relevant. They will still be relevant and timely after the 2022 federal election, and should be reconsidered now.

### **Senator Bridget McKenzie's private senator's Bill – 2015**

#### **Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015**

Senator McKenzie introduced the Bill after the ABC rationalised its operations following the fiscally tight 2014 Abbott government Budget. It did so by targeting regional services and axing a radio programme with a regional emphasis and target audience, *Bush Telegraph*, while ensuring minimal to no cuts to the ABC's "diversity portfolio," notably women, Indigenous and what are now known as LGBTI+ communities.

The powers-that-be in the ABC at the time decided that something had to give, and it appears they preferred to target regional services and programmes, rather than offerings to more fashionable diversity groups.

The McKenzie Bill was intended to amend the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 (the ABC Act) to insert: rural and regional mandate provisions into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Charter; model employer requirements; and to ensure that regional stations are staffed appropriately during natural disasters and emergencies.

Key features of the McKenzie Bill were drafted to:

- Amend the ABC Charter to provide for geographic diversity as well as national identity and cultural diversity.
- Amend the ABC Act to ensure the ABC devotes sufficient resources to serving rural and regional communities.
- Amend the ABC Act to ensure the ABC maintains "an effective presence in regional communities" and provide local content across its platforms.
- Amend the ABC Act to ensure that the ABC considers the "social service and community" perspective, as well as commercial considerations, when making programming and management decisions.
- Establish an ABC Rural and Regional Advisory Council in addition to the existing ABC Advisory Council.

- Require the ABC Board to consult the Rural and Regional Advisory Council, and regional staff, in relation to policy and decisions affecting rural and regional areas.
- Require the ABC Board to include at least two directors residing in regional areas; and
- Require the ABC to report on the Corporation's rural and regional activity and the activities of the Rural and Regional Advisory Council in its annual reports.

The McKenzie Bill, as a private senator's Bill, was introduced but never given a second reading debate. The Bill lapsed in May 2016 with the double dissolution of Parliament. In the new Parliament after July 2016, the Bill was restored to the Notice Paper, but it was never debated. It was superseded by the Government's similar bill, but was never withdrawn and lapsed on the 2016 Parliament's dissolution in April 2019.

Nevertheless, as will be seen, the McKenzie Bill was decisively influential on the two Government's Bills that succeeded it. These Bills refined the McKenzie Bill rather than replaced it.

### **Turnbull government bill**

#### **Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures Bill) 2017**

In order to obtain passage of its media ownership reforms through the Senate, the Turnbull government gave a commitment to One Nation to pass a Bill like Senator McKenzie's. Senator Pauline Hanson and One Nation shared similar views to Senator McKenzie on the weakness and half-heartedness of the ABC's commitment to regional Australia, and sought the legislation in return for their support on ownership reform.

Essentially, in return for One Nation's Senate votes, Prime Minister Turnbull and Communications Minister Fifield agreed to introduce an update of the McKenzie Bill as Government legislation. The 2017 Bill honoured that commitment.

Broadly like the McKenzie Bill, the 2017 Bill was more tightly targeted in effect and operation. Its introduction was a quid pro quo for One Nation support for media ownership reforms: there is no indication that the Turnbull government was seriously motivated to ensure its passage beyond honouring that commitment to introduce it. Surprisingly, One Nation did not push for its passage once it was introduced.

Key features of the Bill were drafted to amend the ABC Act to:

- Amend the ABC Charter to provide for regional as well as national identity, and for geographic as well as cultural diversity.
- Establish an ABC Regional Advisory Council in addition to the existing ABC Advisory Council, to ensure "the ABC Board takes into account the unique views and needs of regional areas in making any significant changes to its broadcasting services that impact regional audiences."
- Require the ABC Board to consult the Regional Advisory Council, and regional staff, "before making a change to a broadcasting service in a regional area that is likely to have a significant impact on audiences in the regional area. The Regional Advisory Council will also be able to provide advice to the ABC Board on matters relating to the provision of broadcasting services in regional areas."
- Require the ABC Board to include at least two appointed non-executive directors "who have a substantial connection to, or substantial experience in, a regional area through business, industry or community involvement."

- Require the ABC Board to report annually on a range of additional matters, including the total number of individuals employed by the Corporation in regional and metropolitan areas, and the ratio of individuals employed as journalists compared to those employed as support staff.

### Senate inquiry

The 2017 Bill was given a First Reading in October 2017. It was referred to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee the following month. The Committee had a Coalition majority membership and was chaired by Tasmanian Liberal senator, Jonathan Duniam, but a vocal non-Government minority including the high-profile Greens senator and media favourite, Sarah Hanson-Young.

There were only twelve submissions to the inquiry, of which two, Free TV Australia's<sup>16</sup> (representing commercial free-to-air TV organisations) and the ABC's<sup>17</sup>, stand out as representing industry views<sup>18</sup>. No hearings were undertaken.

Free TV Australia generally supported the Bill, but its submission highlighted the extent of commercial television's services to regional Australia. It noted that any changes to the ABC's regional remit should not cut across those services. Free TV Australia did, however, welcome the proposed changes, as both clarifying and focusing the ABC's commitment to regional Australia. It said of the Bill:

Free TV considers that these amendments would add some much-needed detail to the ABC's charter and help the national broadcaster operate within the intention of its Act...Properly interpreted and enacted, this should mean that the new provisions contained in this Bill would focus the ABC on providing unique services to regional and rural areas<sup>19</sup>.

Free TV Australia described this proposed amendment as adding "some much needed detail to the ABC's charter" which would "help the national broadcaster operate within the intention of its Act." Free TV Australia submitted that the proposed amendment would "focus the ABC on providing unique services to regional and rural areas."<sup>20</sup>

The ABC, however, was dismissive, even contemptuous of the Bill, and maintained it was both unnecessary and a significant waste of resources if implemented. The ABC contended that it more than met its obligation to regional Australia, that one-third of its total budget was then dedicated to ensuring effective services to the one-third of the Australian population that lives in the regions; and that regional Australians benefit not only from targeted local and regional services, but from the full range of ABC radio and TV programming, including news and current affairs.

In short, the ABC strongly opposed the Bill, claiming it was unnecessary and imposed onerous new burdens. Moreover, the Corporation bitterly resented any implication that it was failing its regional audiences.

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<sup>16</sup> Free TV Australia, submission to the 2017-18 Senate inquiry: <file:///C:/Users/terry/Downloads/Sub02.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> ABC submission to the 2017-18 Senate inquiry: [file:///C:/Users/terry/Downloads/Sub09%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/terry/Downloads/Sub09%20(1).pdf)

<sup>18</sup> The Friends of the ABC submission predictable followed the ABC party line.

<sup>19</sup> Free TV Australia submission, page 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

The Committee reported in February 2018. It concluded that, overall, the submissions received supported the Bill, and that the Bill should be passed.

The Committee, however, did not entirely divide on party lines. Labor senators did not oppose the Bill in a dissenting report, although Labor was not in favour of the proposed reforms themselves. This suggests the Bill could have been passed in negotiation with Labor.

Only Greens senators Janet Rice and Sarah Hanson-Young formally dissented, with predictable attacks on the Coalition and ABC funding, and citing the ABC's submission as confirmation of their views.

### **Fate of the 2017 Bill**

Following the Committee's report, the bill stalled in the Senate. Presumably because the Government did not have the numbers to pass it, and had fulfilled its political undertaking to One Nation, the bill remained on the Notice Paper but never debated in the Senate. Nor, however, did One Nation publicly pressure the Government to bring debate on.

Given Labor did not reject the Bill in the Senate committee inquiry, it can only be concluded that the Government's failure to press the Bill in the Senate was a missed opportunity to legislate needed reforms by negotiating with the Opposition.

Like the McKenzie Bill in the previous Parliament, the 2017 Bill then lapsed when the 2016 Parliament was dissolved in April 2019.

### **Morrison government bill**

#### **Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures Bill) 2019**

Having been returned in May 2019, the Morrison government reintroduced the 2017 Bill into the new Parliament. It was introduced in July 2019, and this time it was debated in the House of Representatives in September 2019.

Essentially, the 2019 Bill was unchanged from the 2017 version.

In his second reading speech, the Minister for Communications, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP, said:

As a whole, the bill contains a range of measures to strengthen the focus of the ABC on rural and regional communities. These constitute important safeguards for those Australians living outside the capital cities and larger metropolitan areas.

They will help to secure the outcome that our primary national broadcaster retains and deepens its connection to communities in the bush<sup>21</sup>.

Unlike in 2017, however, the 2019 Bill was given a full second reading debate in the House of Representatives. Anthony Albanese's Labor opposition opposed the 2019 Bill in the House, and used the debate to vent its usual gripes about ABC funding. The Bill was, however, enthusiastically supported by backbench Members from the National, Liberal and Liberal National Parties.

The ABC itself maintained its trenchant opposition, claiming it was already doing everything the Bill wanted in terms of prioritising the needs of regional Australia. While the Corporation did not publicly oppose the Bill, as it had in 2017, it is clear from the speeches of Opposition Labor MPs that they were being briefed by the ABC.

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<sup>21</sup> House of Representatives *Hansard*, 31 July 2019.



This time, there was no Senate inquiry into the Bill, although submissions from the 2017 inquiry – particularly the ABC’s – were referred to in the parliamentary debate.

Although it was introduced as a Government Bill<sup>22</sup>, the debate petered out and the Bill never went to a vote on the second reading. It was unlikely to pass in the Senate given the lack of support among Labor, the Greens, and the crossbench other than One Nation, but disappointingly the Morrison government failed to pursue it with any conviction, perhaps in the mistaken belief that it was not popular, or simply there was too much resistance for it to pass.

Consequently, although the Bill is still live on the House of Representatives Notice Paper, it will lapse when the Parliament is dissolved in the first months of 2022.

What is clear, however, is that the governance solutions proposed by these three Bills were never seriously questioned, except by the ABC itself. In short, these boil down to:

- A specific reference in the ABC Charter to regional Australia as a target audience.
- The specific inclusion of at least two members of the ABC Board with direct personal and professional connections to regional Australia; and
- Ensuring that the ABC’s advisory and governance structures are aware of, and responsive to, the characteristics, needs and aspiration of regional Australians and regional communities.

How these goals might be met now, and the strength of the support for them in regional Australia, will be discussed subsequently in Part 4.

In addition to the three Bills’ suggestions about specific rural and regional advisory structures, this paper is also proposing an additional governance option: a separate ABC Regional organisation that operates parallel to, but distinct from, the ABC proper. This proposal is outlined in Part 3.

### **Comment**

Support for the McKenzie or Government Bills was never seriously tested on the floor of Parliament. They petered out because they lapsed on dissolution, or were not fully debated and taken for votes because it was judged they would not be passed by both Houses. There was apparently a lack of political will, on the part of the Government, to force the issue with a likely hostile Senate.

This, however, did not consider evaluating whether the proposed reforms would be acceptable and popular in the wider Australian community, especially in regional Australia.

However, the Page Research Centre survey results indicate that the 2015, 2017 and 2019 Bills’ proposals are highly popular across age groups; education levels; regional communities; gender; and state. The ABC might resist them, but they would have broad public support, especially in regional Australia.

These survey results will be discussed in Part 4.

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<sup>22</sup> House of Representatives *Hansard*, 16 September 2019.

### **PART 3: ESTABLISH A SEPARATE ABC REGIONAL ORGANISATION?**

In addition to the solutions proposed by the McKenzie and Coalition Government Bills, there is a more radical way of getting the ABC to concentrate better on the needs of regional Australia.

A parallel ABC organisation dedicated to the regions could be created. Not just a division in the current Corporation, but a parallel, free-standing corporate entity with its own mission and Charter.

This relationship could be characterised as how the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) is to the ABC, or the Indigenous-focused broadcaster NITV is to SBS.

#### **ABC Regional governance**

The new corporation would derive from a split based on geography. The new organisation – which could be called ABC Regional, or Australian Regional Broadcasting – would have a legislative remit and sufficient budget to ensure that regional Australia has fair access to high-quality broadcasting, entertainment, and news services.

It would be a duly constituted company under Corporations Law, with a Charter established by legislation under the new organisation's own Act.

Its Charter would focus squarely on serving the needs and aspirations of all regional Australians and regional communities. It would make clear that all regional Australians are equal, regardless of age, gender, Aboriginality, or any other personal characteristics, and that they have equal rights of access to mainstream radio and television broadcasting services. What matters is that the catchment community for ABC Regional is outside capital city metropolitan areas, and its management, programming and editorial values are intricately connected with Regional Australia, rather than the capital city, and specifically inner-city, progressive values penetrating the collective mindset and output of existing ABC management and production staff.

As a wholly owned Government Business Enterprise, ABC Regional would have three ex officio shareholders to whom its Board would answer: The Minister for Finance; the Minister for Communications; and the Minister for Regional Communications. Alternately, to preserve editorial independence, there could be an arrangement whereby the ministerial shareholders are bound by the resolutions of ABC Regional's board, except on issues of funding and statutory appointments – provided ABC Regional's Board fulfils the terms of its Charter.

The Board itself would comprise people selected by the Minister for Communications, in conjunction with the Minister for Regional Communications. As with the ABC, the Governor-General-in-Council would formally appoint Board members. Each member would, in addition to their specific board-related expertise, be able to demonstrate a strong personal and/or professional connection with Regional Australia. This does not necessarily assume current residence in Regional Australia.

Like the ABC, the Board would have a Managing Director as chief executive officer, responsible to the Chairman and, through him or her, to the Minister for Communications and the Minister for Regional Communications. A staff-elected director, as with the existing ABC, may also be deemed necessary to ensure parliamentary support for ABC Regional's establishment.

#### **Headquarters of ABC Regional**

The head office of ABC Regional would be in a large regional centre but not a capital city (except for Hobart, given the whole of Tasmania is considered a regional media market), and would not necessarily be in New South Wales or Victoria.

Suitable locations include Newcastle, Wollongong/Illawarra, Ballarat, Hobart, Launceston, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, and Murray Bridge.

Similarly, state offices of ABC Regional ideally would not be in state capital cities, although in the cases of South Australia and Western Australia, this may not be practical.

### **ABC Regional's roles and responsibilities**

In this model, ABC Regional would take over, from the existing ABC, responsibility for:

- Non-metro radio and TV stations.
- Non-metro news and current affairs infrastructure; and
- Non-metro transmission infrastructure.

Given it is more urban than even Sydney and Melbourne, the Australian Capital Territory, which is currently treated as a regional media market, would remain part of the metropolitan ABC network.

Tasmania, including Hobart, would remain a regional market for the purposes of ABC Regional.

Other than its own ABC Regional website, online and digital services, including iView, would remain the responsibility of the metropolitan ABC, with Regional ABC paying to license access to the platforms for its services, or buying space for its own content in them.

### **ABC Regional's funding**

In its submission to the Senate inquiry on the 2017 Bill, the ABC said:

The ABC estimates that over one-third of its total annual budget is specifically invested in services to the one-third of Australians who live in regional and rural centres. This expenditure includes content, transmission and other infrastructure costs.<sup>23</sup>

On that basis, one-third of the ABC's current recurrent funding allocation would be transferred to the new ABC Regional entity. There could be one-off additional funding in the first financial year to assist both ABC organisations with separation and establishment costs.

Other revenue options include limited or comprehensive advertising. It is noted, however, that this would mean competing with regional commercial media for advertising revenue, and would arguably not be popular with regional audiences happy with ABC services as (self-promotion excepted) commercial-free broadcasting.

Respondents to the Page Research Centre Survey overwhelmingly were opposed to the ABC carrying advertising, preferring the ABC as an advert-free service<sup>24</sup>. To seek supplementary funding from advertising could erode the value of an ABC Regional service to its catchment audience.

### **ABC Regional programmes and broadcasting**

ABC Regional would be chartered to ensure that regional Australians would have a reliable and high-quality source of programmes and services responding to their needs, and the realities of their communities.

This relates to information and entertainment, as well as news and current affairs.

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<sup>23</sup> ABC submission to the 2017 Senate inquiry, page 4.

<sup>24</sup> To be inserted when link to the survey restored.

It may well be that the ABC Regional platform mainly takes ABC Metropolitan content, but with adaptations to regional audiences, similar to the relationship between ITV and regional commercial television broadcasters in Britain, such as Thames and Anglia, in the 1950s to 1990s.

There would be, however, nothing stopping ABC Regional from commissioning new content, or buying programmes from SBS and independent content-makers, or from buying in overseas content relevant to regional audiences. It could also commission and produce regional-focused programmes of its own, and slot them into its radio and TV schedules.

Its Charter would specifically encourage ABC Regional to source, promote and nurture content from regional and rural content-makers, as well as being relevant to those communities.

### **ABC Regional news and current affairs**

ABC Regional would take over the ABC's regional newsrooms and affiliated journalists and staff. Its Board would be charged with ensuring ABC Regional's news and current affairs services produced quality regional news and information content at local, state, and national levels.

The ABC Regional Charter would also make truly clear that news and current affairs content on matters affecting regional communities, for example environment and climate issues, must be impartial, fair, and balanced, and must consider the specific interests and needs of regional communities. It must not come from the Left, or the Right.

But giving greater responsibility and control to regional journalists and producers should also help offset the "Ultimo view" of political, environmental, and social issues.

### **Challenges in implementing**

Creating a new organisation, and managing a civilised "divorce" between the existing ABC and a new ABC Regional would be complex and challenging. In practice, bringing the organisation into being would take considerable time and financial investments to develop, legislate and implement.

A reasonable estimate of the start-up time, however, is three to four years from a Government announcement post the 2022 election.

But by using existing infrastructure, retaining staff to the greatest extent possible (although some staff would be transferred between organisations), and keeping management structures as lean and efficient as possible, the start-up and recurrent costs of a new ABC Regional organisation could be kept to the lowest possible impact on the federal budget.

The biggest challenge would be the two ABC organisations establishing the terms of their working, financial and content relationships, including agreeing on terms and conditions, and establishing the legal frameworks to underpin them.

### **Popularity of an ABC Regional plan**

It may have its practical challenges, but establishing an ABC Regional entity, with a remit targeted squarely at regional Australia, would be extremely popular with the Australians it would serve.

The popularity of this plan, as revealed by the Page Research Centre survey, is discussed in Part 4. Notwithstanding its complexity, this concept of a separate ABC Regional organisation was very popular with respondents<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> See page 23 below for full results.

**Should the ABC have a distinct and separate Regional Australia Division based outside capital cities?**

The responses were:

- 73 per cent of all respondents said Yes.

Respondents were also asked:

**Would moving some of the ABC's administration and production from Sydney and Melbourne to regional centres like Bendigo, Launceston and Rockhampton improve the ABC's understanding and awareness of regional Australia and what matters to it?**

Again, responses highly supported this statement:

- 80 per cent of all respondents said yes.
- 78 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women said yes.
- 77 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 80 per cent aged 35-54; and 82 per cent over 55 said yes.
- By regionality, responses ranged from 77 per cent to 81.5 per cent.
- By education level, responses ranged from 77 to 83 per cent.
- By political affiliation, responses for National, Liberal, ALP, Greens and One Nation supporters were all in the low-mid 80s, with the slight exception of National voters – 74 per cent.

Clearly, the vast majority of regional Australians want an ABC that understands and responds to their specific needs, and the unique aspects of Australian regional life, culture and economy. Equally clearly, most regional Australians are not satisfied the ABC is doing that effectively now.

If an ABC Regional separate entity can reconnect the ABC with its regional roots, and provide the geographic diversity to the ABC's outlook that simply isn't possible out of an Ultimo office window, then it should be in the reform mix.

## PART 4: POPULARITY OF PROPOSED ABC REGIONAL REFORM MEASURES

As discussed in Part 2, the uncompleted legislative proposals in the last decade to reform the ABC's structure and governance boiled down to:

- A specific reference in the ABC Charter to designate regional Australia as a target audience and a priority for representation in ABC programming.
- The specific inclusion of at least two members of the ABC Board with direct personal and professional connections to regional Australia; and
- Ensuring that the ABC's advisory and governance structures are aware of, and responsive to, the characteristics, needs and aspiration of regional Australians and regional communities.

To these could be added the proposal to create a separate ABC Regional organisation as discussed in Part 3.

These proposals petered out because they were either, in the case of Senator McKenzie's Bill, being a private senator's initiative not endorsed by the Abbott government and, in the case of the Turnbull and Morrison government bills, simply a lack of political interest from a government dominated by urban interests, and reluctant to antagonise the ABC any more than it needs to – ever-conscious of the Coalition view that the ABC is “our enemies talking to our friends”.<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, the three Bills each got nowhere, effectively cancelled for lack of government interest.

The Page Research Centre opinion survey, however, indicated that had any one of these Bills become law, their reforming measures would have been as popular with the regional Australian public as they were unpopular with the Senate crossbench.

Each of the key measures not only rated positively, but rated up a storm. In the survey, they achieved stratospheric ratings that crossed age, sex, regionality, education and state barriers. Remarkably, they proved as popular, or even more popular, with supporters of the political Left as well as with the Centre and the Right.

### Including Regional Australia in the ABC Charter

The Page Research Centre survey asked two questions in relation to the Charter. One assessed awareness of the Charter, and the other asked specifically whether regional Australia should be designated a Charter priority.

The awareness question was:

**Do you know that its charter requires the ABC to consider ethnic and social diversity in its programming, however regional Australia is not included as a category?**

The responses were:

- 80 per cent of all respondents said no, and 20 per cent said yes.
- 76 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women said no.
- 74 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 79 per cent aged 35-54; and 83 per cent over 55 said no.

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<sup>26</sup> A comment first made by John Howard's astute political adviser Grahame Morris, but used subsequently by Prime Ministers Howard and Abbott.

- By regionality, responses ranged from 77.5 per cent to 82 per cent.
- By education level, 88 per cent school-level; and 76 per cent of trade/TAFE and tertiary-educated responses ranged from 77 to 83 per cent.
- By political affiliation (Greens, Labor, Liberal, National, One Nation or Other) “No” responses ranged from 73 per cent to 85.5 per cent. Even Greens supporters, who could be expected to be the most ABC-literate group, came in with a 76 per cent negative response.
- By state, the average “No” response was around 80 per cent.

Based on these findings, as far as the general public goes, the ABC Charter is a well-kept secret.

Having been advised that regionality was not a Charter mandate, respondents were then asked:

**Should the needs of regional Australia be specifically included in the ABC Charter?**

The responses were striking:

- 85 per cent of all respondents said yes, and just 15 per cent said no.
- 85 per cent of both men and women said yes.
- 73 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 84 per cent aged 35-54; and 91 per cent over 55 said yes.
- By regionality, “yes” responses ranged from 84 per cent to 91 per cent.
- By education level, 84 per cent school- and tertiary-level respondents; and 87 per cent of trade/TAFE -educated respondents said yes.
- By political affiliation, “yes” responses ranged from 74 per cent (Greens) to 89 per cent (One Nation). But Labor and Liberal supporters each rated 87 per cent, and National supporters 84 per cent.
- By state, the yes responses ranged between 80 per cent (ACT and the Northern Territory) and 87 per cent Queensland.

Clearly, the ABC’s legislated Charter including regional Australia as a primary priority, and not just incidental to other elements the Australian community’s social and ethnic composition, would be welcomed by regional Australians. On the evidence of the Page survey, this is regardless of political affiliation, notwithstanding their age, sex, education and regionality.

It is a proposal with no political downside, and no implementation cost.

**Regional Australia specific representation on the ABC Board**

The inclusion of otherwise suitably qualified people on the ABC Board who also have a strong connection to regional Australia was put to the Page Research Centre survey respondents.

The question was:

**Should someone from regional Australia always be included on the ABC’s Board of Directors?**

The responses were:

- 84 per cent of all respondents said yes.
- 80 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women said yes.
- 74 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 79 per cent aged 35-54; and 91 per cent over 55 said Yes.

- Across the regions, “Yes” responses averaged around 82 per cent, with the lowest 70 per cent and the highest 85 per cent.
- By education level, 82 per cent of school- and tertiary-level respondents; and 85 per cent of trade/TAFE-educated respondents, said Yes.
- By political affiliation, all parties other than the Nationals (74 per cent) had “Yes” responses higher than 82 per cent, with One Nation supporters the highest at 87 percent, closely followed by Labor on 85 per cent.
- Except for Western Australia (71 per cent, no state or territory had a “Yes” response lower than 80 per cent. By state, the yes responses ranged between 80 per cent, (ACT and the Northern Territory) and then highest 87 per cent for Queensland.

The Page Research Centre survey did not ask specific questions in relation to the ABC Advisory Council and whether there should be a separate ABC Regional Advisory Council established. It is clear from these responses, however, that there is an expectation in regional Australia that its voice is heard in the corridors of the ABC, including its advisory structures. While the ABC Advisory Council currently includes several people with direct regional backgrounds, this does not preclude the Corporation from establishing a regional sub-committee of that Advisory Council, or establishing an entirely new regional advisory council within the terms of section 11 of the ABC Act.

It may be anathema to the ABC itself, and to its supporters in the political elite, but real-world regional Australians are demanding they be represented on the ABC Board.

Even if it is not legislated as mandatory, Prime Ministers and Communications ministers of both sides of politics should take note when it comes to appointing ABC Board chairmen and non-executive directors. No-one is saying that a connection to rural Australia should come at a cost to good governance or depriving the Board of needed management and industry qualifications and experience. However, the message of the Page Research Centre survey findings is that it is both good policy and good politics to select at least some Board members because they have both a strong regional connection and appropriate competencies.

And, again, this is a reform that has no political downside and involves no direct financial cost to implement.

### **Establish an ABC Regional entity dedicated to serving regional Australia**

The concept of a separate-but-parallel ABC Regional organisation was also included in the Page Research Centre survey. The question asked was:

#### **Should the ABC have a distinct and separate Regional Australia Division based outside capital cities?**

The responses were:

- 73 per cent of all respondents said Yes.
- 71 per cent of men and 74 per cent of women said Yes.
- 73 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 69 per cent aged 35-54; and 76 per cent over 55 said Yes.
- Across the regions, “Yes” responses ranged from 67 to 84 per cent.
- By education level, 72 per cent of school; 71 per cent of tertiary; and 76 per cent of trade/TAFE-educated respondents, said Yes.



- By political affiliation, Yes respondents for all parties were around the 75 per cent mark. This was surprisingly consistent across the political spectrum, with Labor and the Greens scoring around the same as their Nationals, Liberal and One Nation counterparts.
- Except for Western Australia (67 per cent), no state or territory had a “Yes” response lower than 70 per cent, with the ACT and the Northern Territory highest at 80 per cent.

Given this option would, of all reform options considered, be the most complex, time-consuming and resource-intensive, the consistently high level of support for it was remarkable. For that reason alone, politically astute policy-makers should not dismiss this option out of hand.

This stratospheric support can also be interpreted, however, as a proxy for significant dissatisfaction in Regional Australia with the leadership and direction of the ABC. That would include political leadership from the government of the day.

Regional Australians want change; they want the ABC to do better by and for them; and they want an ABC organisation in which is not only for them, but is of them.

### **ABC Ombudsman**

Given that ABC complaints mechanisms and dispute resolution have been controversial in recent times, with the ABC initiating its own review, and the establishment of a separate Senate inquiry voted down by Labor, the Greens and Senate crossbenchers, the Page Research Centre survey gauged its respondents’ views on whether there should be an independent ABC Ombudsman.

The question asked was:

**The taxpayer funded ABC Charter stipulates it must be politically unbiased and impartial. Should there be an independent ombudsman to make sure the ABC meets the obligations of its charter?**

The responses were:

- 44.5 per cent of all respondents said Yes; 55 per cent said No.
- 50 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women said Yes.
- 41 per cent of respondents aged 18-43; 45 per cent aged 35-54; and 46 per cent over 55 said Yes.
- Across the regions, “Yes” responses ranged from 42 to 48 per cent.
- By education level, 43 per cent of school; 44 per cent of trade/TAFE-educated; and 46 per cent of tertiary-educated respondents, said Yes.
- By political affiliation, 54 per cent of Labor supporters and 50 per cent of Greens supporters said “Yes”. By contrast, only 39 per cent of Liberal; 36 per cent of Nationals and 34 per cent of One Nation supporters also said Yes. Given it could be expected Coalition supporters would be more concerned than those on the Left about ABC bias and impartiality, this was a counter-intuitive surprise.
- By state and territory, “Yes” responses ranged from 40 to 47 per cent.

While the ABC did better on this governance reform measure, the significant level of regional Australia support for an independent ABC Ombudsman is hard for the political elite to ignore. That support was highest amongst the ABC’s natural political constituency on the Left surely is encouraging for any Coalition government deciding to go down that path, as this suggests the political resistance to it might not necessarily reflect the wider community’s views.

## PART 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion from this analysis is simple.

There is no political downside from implementing the ABC governance reforms first proposed by Senator Bridget McKenzie and subsequently followed up by the Turnbull and Morrison governments.

They are realistic, and the Page Research Centre survey findings indicate that they are more than just popular: regional Australians demand them.

In opposing them, Labor, Green and crossbench MPs, and senators are defying the public will.

### Recommendations

Based on the evidence of the Page Research Centre opinion survey, it is recommended that:

1. The *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill* be updated and introduced into the next Parliament by a re-elected Liberal-National government. This includes mandating at least two people with a direct regional connection being appointed to the ABC Board, and an ABC Regional Advisory Council being established to advise the Board and ABC management specifically on Regional Australia issues.
2. The Bill be fully debated and taken to a vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.
3. The Bill be part of the Liberal-Nationals 2022 election policy manifesto, and thus has a mandate to be implemented as a specific election commitment.
4. Pending any mandating legislation, the Minister for Communications, in association with the Minister for Regional Communications, directs the ABC Board to establish an ABC Regional Advisory Council under the terms of section 11 (2) of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*.
5. More ABC administrative and production roles and functions be moved from capital cities to regional centres capable of accommodating them.
6. Consideration be given to establishing an ABC Regional corporate organisation separate from, but working with, the ABC, and the proposal put to a public consultation process by a re-elected Liberal-Nationals government.
7. A re-elected Liberal-Nationals government should give serious consideration to establishing an independent ABC Ombudsman to resolve complaints about the Corporation's conduct, bias and any failures to be politically impartial.

But even if the ABC's legislative framework is not reformed as recommended, the findings of this report and the Page Research Centre Survey indicate that ensuring regional Australia's voice is heard adequately in Ultimo and around Australia is what regional Australians want.

In that case, recommendations relating to Board composition, advisory structures, and organisation structure, including an effective regional presence, can still be implemented as matters of ministerial policy. The needs and interests of regional Australia should always be taken in to account when considering appointments to the ABC chairmanship and Board.

Being responsive and sensitive to the concerns of regional Australia is key to winning and retaining government.

The evidence is clear that ensuring the ABC is fit-for-purpose in respect of regional Australia is not only a practical necessity; it is a policy choice that can bring political rewards to the parties that commit to it.

## APPENDIX: THE PAGE RESEARCH CENTRE SURVEY

The Page Research Centre engaged the respected polling company, Compass Polling, to sample regional Australia's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes to the ABC.

The sample consisted of 1,002 people living outside capital cities, and was representative of the population on key demographics of age, gender, location, income, and education, as measured by the most recent Census.

Respondents were asked questions about:

- Respondent's viewing and listening habits, including their preferred sources of news and information.
- The value and reliability, to them, of the ABC's programmes and services; and
- The ABC governance reforms proposed by the Bills of 2015, 2017 and 2019, and in this paper.

Regionality was determined as follows:

- Cities other than the state capital (over 100,00 population) – e.g., Wollongong.
- Large town (population 50,000-100,00) – e.g., Rockhampton.
- Medium Town (population 10,000-50,000) – e.g., Goulburn.
- Small town (population 2,000-10,000) – e.g., Bordertown; and
- Rural and remote localities with local populations less than 2,000 – e.g., Mossman.

Compass Polling's results gauge public opinion with an, at most, 2.5 per cent margin of error. This is based on margin of confidence calculations for a sample of 1000 drawn by probability methods. The sample was recruited from Australia's leading consumer panel providers PureProfile and Dynata.

Data collection was completed on 28 September 2021.

The full set of questions asked of respondents by Compass Polling was compiled by the Page Research Centre and this paper's author, Terry Barnes, Principal of consultancy Cormorant Policy Advice. For more detail on the full results of the polling please contact Executive Director of the Page Research Centre, Kristian Jenkins: [Kristian.jenkins@page.org.au](mailto:Kristian.jenkins@page.org.au)