



ABC ALUMNI LIMITED SUBMISSION TO EXPERT PANEL ON:

**A new international development policy and performance framework for Australia**

14 February 2020

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**INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT**

ABC Alumni Limited represents some 300 former senior staff and affiliated supporters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) – many of them experienced reporters, foreign correspondents, news editors, heads of drama, senior managers, and Board directors including two former Chairs. We support fully funded, high quality, independent, ethical and free public media in Australia and internationally.

We thank the Expert Panel for the opportunity to make this submission.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The role of media in safeguarding democracy and good governance is a pillar of our society.

Given Australia's geography and trading realities, our security at all levels relies on the relationships forged with nations in the Indo-Pacific region.

Over many decades Australia, through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), has built an enviable reputation in Asia and the Pacific as a trusted provider of quality, independent public media. Through its International Development arm (ABCID), the ABC has also fostered enduring relationships, especially in the Pacific where it has been highly valued as the main provider of support for local public interest media, including the building of effective media infrastructure and the provision of emergency information services.

This important "soft power" influence provided by the ABC is now in jeopardy due to severe budget cuts and other funding cancellations by the federal government which have diminished the ABC's – and Australia's – capacity to provide all the services that are needed.

As a result, the way is open for other nations to fill the gap, including those that do not hold the same democratic, human rights and other values that we do. This process has begun.

With all nations in our region now facing complex geopolitical challenges (potentially as great as at any time since World War II), Australia cannot afford to allow its cost-effective international broadcasting service – ABC Radio Australia, ABC Australia (television), and countless ABC online and digital offerings on numerous platforms – remain at their weakest point in more than 60 years.

The situation has become critical and needs urgent rectification.

This submission therefore respectfully recommends:

- (a) recognition of the important role the ABC plays in the Indo-Pacific as a provider of “capacity development” for media in developing partner countries;
- (b) recognition of the role that the ABC’s international multi-platform services play in creating strong relations with people in Australia’s developing partner nations, in providing them with information and debate (including around Australia’s development goals) and in acting as a trusted role model in public interest broadcasting;
- (c) a commitment that the ABC should continue, through an enhanced international service, as the voice of Australia in the Indo-Pacific region;
- (d) a significant additional federal government funding allocation to the ABC to enable it to provide a comprehensive multi-platform media service to the region, suitable to the times and in keeping with those of comparable developed nations; and
- (e) a significant increase in federal government funding to the ABC to support the development of local public interest media in both Asia and the Pacific through ABCID.

## **BACKGROUND**

We appreciate that the Panel will be dealing with a great many submissions to this Review as well as referring to submissions to earlier Inquiries such as the 2018 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade *Inquiry into the Strategic Effectiveness and Outcomes of Australia’s aid program in the Indo-Pacific and its role in supporting our regional interests*. To avoid duplication, we refer the Panel to the submissions from the ABC for detailed background information on the history and many achievements of both the ABC media service and the dedicated ABCID aid division.

## **CURRENT ISSUES**

ABC Alumni substantially endorses the work of the Australia Asia Pacific Media Initiative (AAPMI), formerly known as Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific (SABAP). Again, in the interests of avoiding duplication of information, we refer the Panel to that organisation’s submissions to your current consultation process and to the then Department of Communications and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) joint *Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific* and the DFAT *Soft Power Review*, both of which were made in the name of SABAP.

We would, however, like to expand upon the following points:

At a time when propaganda and misinformation are widespread through multiple means of mass and targeted communication – from state-controlled media, to the many global social media and online outlets (including the FAANGs – Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) – the counter-balance of a trusted, reliable and independent public media source of news, information, science, entertainment and specialist programming has never been more important to the security of Australia and our near neighbours.

There can be no doubt, also, about the influence of respectful public interest media initiatives of various types in assisting developing nations to build and maintain democracy and good governance.

With quality media across the Indo-Pacific now facing very serious challenges to their ability to play their “fourth estate” role, we consider it essential that Australia’s international development policy and programs include a strong media component.

The only organisation with the proven knowledge, skills and appropriate experience to adequately provide this service on behalf of Australia is the ABC.

Demonstrably, the ABC – like its cousin the BBC World Service – is, through its reputation for trusted independent programs, an invaluable “soft power” asset.

We therefore urge the Panel to also ensure that the ABC’s multi-platform voice is strong and is used effectively to demonstrate Australia’s values, including its commitment to democracy, good governance and the development of our partner nations.

It is, of course, essential that all development programs respond to the needs of partners. In this respect, the role of the ABC as both an international broadcaster and as a development partner has been widely praised across the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, in the Pacific, we have seen repeated requests for additional services and programs from people in all walks of life, from the Prime Minister of Vanuatu the Hon. Charlot Salwai Tabimasmias and Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor to media industry figures and to the many hundreds of ordinary listeners who have signed petitions and sent letters since the budget cuts which severely diminished the ABC’s international services six years ago.

Clearly, there is good reason why legislation decrees that the ABC is the only organisation that the Commonwealth can fund for the purpose of international broadcasting.

We note that the ABC Charter – enshrined in s6(b) of the ABC Act [Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act (1983)] – clearly states the ABC’s international obligations as:

- 6 (b) to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:
- (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
  - (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
- (ba) to provide digital media services

We further note that s31AA of the ABC Act clearly states that the ABC or prescribed companies (as defined in s25A) are to be:

“the only providers of Commonwealth-funded international broadcasting services”

It is disappointing that massive reductions in the ABC’s budget over several years – including AU\$196.8 million lost due to the 2014 termination, after just one year, of the 10-year contract with DFAT to operate the Australia Network television service into Asia and the Pacific – have seriously decreased the ABC’s capacity in the international arena. For example, some 80 broadcasters and correspondents posted to the Asia Pacific region were made redundant (more than half the staff, and including a number of crucial correspondents such as the Australia Network’s Pacific correspondent, Sean Dorney). Along with the loss of the Australia Network, the shortwave radio services were also closed down. In no small measure, this signalled to our Pacific neighbours that Australia was abandoning them.

It is a credit to the ABC that, even within such constraints, it has managed to innovatively maintain a presence in the region (albeit reduced) through radio, television and multimedia platforms, and that its development work has continued to be of high quality. But it’s not enough, and we strongly recommend that, in the national interest, the ABC be appropriately funded to fully revitalise and continue its valuable international service. For more details on current services and the way forward, please refer to [this](#) ABC Alumni report.

The ABC provides exceptional value-for-money. At present it spends AU\$11 million of Commonwealth funds on its international services. For that modest sum it provides 24-hour-a-day television to 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific, 24-hour-a-day FM radio in Timor-Leste, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, and a host of digital-mobile and online services. Content of these services is of high quality and includes some programs made specifically for audiences in the Pacific. Programming has for many years showcased work from all parts of the Australian media industry including commercial networks, independent producers, SBS and NITV (the national Indigenous network). Commercial programs currently being shown on ABC Australia include Network Seven’s AFL coverage, Ernie Dingo’s *Going Places* travel program and *Home and Away*.

The ABC’s output compares very favourably with the cost of the service from FreeTV Australia (a body which represents commercial free-to-air television networks). In early 2019, the federal government announced it would provide AU\$17.1 million to FreeTV to send 1,000 hours per year of existing programs to Pacific broadcasters, for three years. This AU\$17.1 million expenditure buys less than six weeks of programming each year. It specifically rules out content produced by the ABC, SBS or NITV as they are not members of FreeTV. The “soft power” value of sending commercial reality TV and other programs made for a comparatively wealthy, Australian audience to developing countries has been called into question. We suggest that in an era when audiences in the region have stated that they want a respectful and enlivening conversation with Australia, these programs will have no discernible strategic policy benefit and in fact have the potential to do harm. Indeed, the commercial networks seem to have little interest in providing a service to the Pacific. At the time this funding was announced, they made it clear that they never sought such funding, and seemingly they knew nothing about it before the announcement was made. Bridget Fair, chief executive of [FreeTV](#), greeted the news saying: “No commercial networks are building partnerships in the Pacific.” More than a year later, we have not seen a single program delivered, nor any tangible indication of valuable partnerships having been forged.

It is now all too obvious that when Australia withdraws a significant amount of its media reach into neighbouring regions, as has happened over the last six years, we risk opening the way for greater influence from other nations that may have very different policies to our own on issues such as the importance of an open democracy and of human rights. This is already being seen in both Asia and the Pacific region, where China's Xinhau News Agency and other [government-related](#) entities are rapidly expanding and advocating their [state-controlled media model](#) with negative consequences for media freedom, as documented in the Reporters Without Borders' [Media Freedom Index](#).

In our view, a strong and reliable Australian voice in this region is a security imperative.

## **CONCLUSION**

We urge the Expert Panel to recommend increased support for quality public interest media in the region in partnership with the ABC and the immediate reinvigoration of the ABC's international services through substantial new funding allocations, to a level calculated as sufficient to fully restore and renew its valuable role.

At a time of increasing geopolitical uncertainty, a strong "soft power" media presence throughout the region is essential to Australia's influence and security. Both Australian media development initiatives and the widely accessible distribution of Australia's voice are crucial tools in this regard.

We thank the Expert Panel for consideration of this submission.

Representatives of ABC Alumni are happy to assist the Panel with any further information required on the issues and viewpoints expressed in this submission.

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