

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY AT THE NEW A.B.C. BUILDING COMPLEX,  
COLLINSWOOD, ADELAIDE, FRIDAY 29 MARCH 1974

It is almost 42 years since the Australian Broadcasting Commission was founded with the requirement that it "shall broadcast from the national broadcasting stations adequate and comprehensive programs, and shall take in the interests of the community all such measures as in the opinion of the Commission are conducive to the full development of suitable broadcasting programs". At this time the Commission began its operations in South Australia from an old stone building in Hindmarsh Square - the first freehold property "acquired" by the A.B.C. in Australia. Today the Commission is able finally to house itself in Adelaide in up-to-date adequate accommodation. The new ten-storey administration, radio and orchestral studio complex here at Collinswood is spacious and, among other things, fully airconditioned. The building will provide vastly improved accommodation for all administrative and program departments, News, Technical Services, Publicity, "TV Times", Staff Association and Credit Union Offices. Large studios for the South Australian Symphony Orchestra and for light entertainment programs and two smaller studios for drama and general production are already fully operative. Hindmarsh Square will be completely vacated by late this year when the last A.B.C. units have moved into this new building.

It is appropriate that such a long-needed development is taking place in 1974. For it appears that this year will be one of great modernisation for the A.B.C. It is only about two weeks since the Minister for the Media, Senator Doug McClelland, tabled in the Federal Parliament the document which provides for modernisation.

I refer, of course, to the report prepared by the Management Consultants, McKinsey & Company. The report suggests a number of important recommendations for the future development of the A.B.C. These range from management organisation to program output.

By the nature of its charter, the Commission itself will take the final decision on acceptance or otherwise of the McKinsey Report recommendations, although inevitably the government will be involved if these proposals require amendments to existing legislation. There is, however, one simple decision, involving both the Commission and the government which has already been made and the importance of which can easily be overlooked. This is the decision to make the McKinsey Report public. When the company made a similar study of the B.B.C., its report there was not published. Both the A.B.C. and the Government decided that the British precedent should not be followed in the handling of what is after all a report for Australians about their national broadcasting system.

Looking beyond the needs of Australians generally, the government and the Commission decided that it was important for the staff of the A.B.C. - 6,700 people - that they should have

ready access to the report. It is too important a document about too important an institution involving too many people for it to remain the subject of rumour and speculation. In as much as morale problems may exist within the A.B.C., I trust that our action in publishing the report indicates a desire and a willingness for the staff to participate in the debate that flows from it. Indeed, it is interesting that the first through discussion, including an interview with the A.B.C. Chairman, took place on an A.B.C. program, "This Day Tonight". It was especially appropriate for this program to open the debate fully and, dare I say it, even with some relish.

While there may be a need for modernising the A.B.C., "This Day Tonight" and its sister program, "Four Corners" symbolises the need for the durability of certain basic principles in the operation of the organisation. They, more than any other programs, have been the subject of controversy arising out of these principles. Simply stated, they have been central to the debate about the independence and freedom from political interference of the organisation. They have involved men and women whose determination to maintain independence and to resist interference deserves high praise.

There will, of course, be some argument about the extent to which the independence and freedom of the A.B.C. have been threatened. I know that previous Chairmen of the A.B.C. have stated that such trends have always been exaggerated. I will say now, however, that those trends have at times been real, although some of them have been implicit rather than stated. I have only to mention what happened in the 1960s when an interview of a former French Premier, M Bidault, was banned to establish my point. I have only to mention what happened to "The Quiet Mutiny", a program about Vietnam produced by an Australian, John Pilger, and what happened about "End of Dialogue", a program on apartheid in South Africa, to support my point.

I would mention in this context the disquiet I expressed in a speech in 1971 about what I saw as a new means of potential unilateral censorship. I spoke then about the dangers of applying too rigidly a policy of not allowing a point of view to be put on the A.B.C. if the opposing point of view was not presented more or less at the same time. I pointed out that it would be absurd for the one point of view not to be put simply because its opponents chose to remain silent. By all means, they should be given the opportunity to speak but, by no means, should their decision to remain silent enable the stifling of the viewpoint which they oppose. "It is wrong that politicians of either Party should in effect be able to censor a debate by refusal to appear," I said then.

Pressure against the A.B.C. has always involved means other than direct approach or intervention. A public statement, even if unaccompanied by action, can in itself be a source of pressure, designed to frighten men and women engaged in the delicate task of presenting information about matters of public controversy. I have no reason to revise my suspicious views of the motives of a former Postmaster-General who could say: "I think in some programs there is not what I would call a proper balance, which gets very close to leading to bias on the program and I don't merely say political bias." I see no reason to revise my suspicions of the motives of the same man who said in the same statement that the Australian Broadcasting Commissioners should preview controversial programs of programs that were likely to be controversial. I certainly see no reason to revise my suspicions about one Reverend parliamentarian who thought the answer to the problem was to come up with his own set of guidelines for the A.B.C.

I have never made any secret of my great admiration for a former Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin. In talking about the A.B.C., I find again that on this, as on so many other subjects, what he had to say made profound sense. It is worth quoting at some length a statement he made on 12 April 1945. He said then:-

"The Government recognises that the intent of the Australian Broadcasting Act is to create a position of special independence of judgment and action for the national broadcasting instrumentality. This is inevitably the case because of its highly delicate function in broadcasting at public expense news statements and discussions which are potent influences on public opinion and attitudes. As the legislation provides, this peculiar function calls for an undoubted measure of independence for the controlling body of the national broadcasting instrumentality which cannot be measured by the constitution of other semi-governmental boards or agencies which do not impinge on the tender and dangerous realms of moral, religious, aesthetic and political values. In the last resort, the healthy and beneficent functions of national broadcasting and the maintenance of public confidence in the system must rest, in all matters touching these values, solely on the integrity and independent judgment of the persons chosen to determine and administer its policy, and not on either review by, or pressure from, any sources outside it, political or non-political. This principle holds good in spite of the necessary responsibility of the Commission to Parliament through the Minister, for the legitimate use of its funds under the terms of the Act, and all the sections of the Act should be read in the light of the above general intent of Parliament to the establishment of the Commission."

Those principles hold good today. Those principles, after a period of questionable activity, are being applied again today. I can affirm from this platform that, since it came into office sixteen months ago, the present government has not sought to interfere with A.B.C. programs. I can affirm that, in that time, we have not sought to suppress any program or determine its contents. Indeed, I can point to one major instance where the present government has created the opportunity for fuller debate of public issues. It has been the practice of Prime Ministers to make occasional broadcasts to the nation about major matters of public interest. Inevitably those broadcasts have involved at times statements which the Parties opposed to those Prime Ministers would dispute vigorously. When I was Leader of the Opposition, I never had the opportunity to gain a similar forum for the statement of contrary views. The present Leader of the Opposition has such a forum. In the last sixteen months the A.B.C. has acceded to every request he has made for the right to reply to any Report to the Nation which I have delivered.

I talked earlier about the need for durability of basic principles, even at a time of modernisation. My Government is firmly committed to those principles of independence and freedom from political interference. We have sought to maintain and enhance them for the A.B.C. since we came into office. It is our hope that we will establish such a strong precedent in this way that no future government will dare to deny them, that no future government will dare to belittle the competence and judgment of honest men or worse, to seek to drive them from the organisation.

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