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## PRIME MINISTER

**Speech by the Prime Minister  
Opening of ABC Ultimo Centre  
Sydney - 22 June 1991**

Managing Director, David Hill  
Chairman, Bob Somervaille  
Friends and supporters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

This ceremony marks, without doubt, an historic milepost in the story of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation - one of the enduringly respected institutions of Australian culture and, in many ways, one of the abidingly great institutions of Australian national life.

We are not just celebrating the opening of a new building - as magnificent an achievement as the Ultimo Centre is.

We are celebrating the survival, and indeed - despite all the dilemmas and challenges of the 1990s - the continued improvement of Australia's independent, non-commercial, publicly-owned broadcasting service.

Today's ceremony tells the people of Australia that their national broadcaster remains the dynamic and creative force that has done so much to shape Australian cultural life.

It tells the nation that the ABC is flourishing as never before, because it is succeeding as never before in being a quality non-commercial broadcaster that reaches out to embrace the overwhelming majority of the Australian people.

The Ultimo Centre is the end product of a successful and effective process of consolidation - a micro-economic reform that represents savings worth millions of dollars a year.

Mathematicians take note: twelve into one does go. This one building replaces 12 separate ABC offices scattered throughout Sydney - and in doing so it provides the best accommodation that corporate management, ABC radio and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra have ever had. \*

If we want an example of Australia as the 'clever country', it is right here. Because this building is fitted out with state of the art equipment, including the highly advanced acoustics in the Eugene Goossens Hall and the largest installation of touch-screen technology by any broadcaster anywhere in the world - international-best technology developed by an Australian firm.

So my first task today is to congratulate everyone who has been involved in the vast and complex process of designing, constructing and fitting out the new building and of managing the move into it.

I recognise achievements like this don't just happen. They are the result of careful and deliberate strategic planning - planning which has been made more possible by the stable funding environment in which the ABC now operates.

The triennial funding guarantee instituted by the Government in 1988 has been a success because it has given the ABC flexibility, with a stable and predictable bottom line.

X As you know, the Government recently decided to continue real terms funding for this and the next two financial years, with the exception of course of the efficiency dividend deducted from all Government agencies.

During this period, the ABC will continue to retain any extra income that it earns.

This means that we have decisively put behind us the acrimony of that annual budget scrum - that was never an enjoyable or an enlightening experience for any of us.

With guaranteed funding, the Australian people know, and we in the Government know, that you are giving them value for their money.

Let me add, once more, that the Government believes the ABC must and will remain free of commercial advertising and sponsorship.

We recognise that the ABC's strength, and the basis for the enormous reservoir of goodwill that exists in the community for the ABC, is its non-commercial style - its capacity to be an independent provider of news and information.

In an industry where broadcasters are too often blamed for appealing to the lowest common denominator, the ABC is still the quality alternative.

And what is just as important, this quality alternative does not mean that the ABC is forever locked into serving a narrow elite of the community.

On TV, programs like Quantum and The Investigators are winning ratings battles against tough commercial opposition - and they are doing so because they are insisting on providing quality.

In the same way, the radio revolution at the ABC has seen a dramatic expansion of the audience without any loss of quality.

In the country, millions of Australians who used to have only one ABC radio station now have a choice of three: Radio National, their local regional station and ABC FM.

And Triple J is now broadcasting to every capital city and to Newcastle.

Let me add that the ABC's international news reporting remains one of its greatest strengths. At this time of historic and exciting change around the world, it is vital that Australians be well informed and that they be informed by Australians, and from an Australian perspective.

Whether it be in the United States or the Soviet Union, in Europe, the Middle East or our own region, the ABC's news bureaus are reporting the world with insight and great expertise - and we are all the beneficiaries of that.

The number of international radio and television awards that the ABC is winning is further proof of the ABC's commitment to quality. And this international recognition is being matched with increased overseas sales of ABC programs and increased revenue from co-productions with foreign broadcasters.

And talking of quality, I want to make special reference to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. As you know, Hazel spent ten days touring the United States with the SSO in 1988, culminating in that fantastic concert in Carnegie Hall. You already have a lot of fans, and you won a lot more on that tour - many of them in the United States and one of them who lives with me in the Lodge.

It is my hope, and it is certainly Hazel's, that these new facilities will enable the Orchestra to continue to make great music - and we are looking forward to hearing you play shortly.

So in all these respects, the ABC is delivering the goods - repaying in full the half-billion dollar investment made by the Australian tax-payer each year.

At the same time, and without compromising the ABC's political and editorial independence, it is important that the ABC be fully accountable to its audience - the tax-payers who support it.

I welcome the fact that the ABC has set up an independent Complaints Review Panel.

We will monitor its progress closely, as part of a review later this year of the total question of accountability of the ABC, and of SBS.

My friends,

This is the ABC's day. It is not the occasion for any lengthy comments from me about the broadcasting industry generally.

But I do want to say this by way of comment about the recent upheavals in commercial television and radio.

It's been a painful process, as the whole industry has come to terms with the unrealistic commercial expectations that some people had created for it.

But all the evidence is that the industry is rebuilding itself in a disciplined and positive way. And why not: the economic fundamentals of commercial broadcasting in Australia are sound.

That is the way back to profitability. It does not lie through cutting back services or through seeking concessions from Government to relax our policy on ownership, control and Australian content. We've made that clear before, and I repeat it today.

There will be no dilution of the status quo in which three Australian-owned commercial television services broadcast to as many Australians as possible.

That is the level of service that Australians have come to expect, and they are entitled to expect it in the future.

My friends,

It won't have escaped your notice that the difficulties afflicting the commercial side of the industry have left the ABC in a position of unparalleled industry strength - to complement your unparalleled obligation as a public broadcaster to serve the people of Australia.

The maintenance of full public funding for the ABC is a significant commitment in the current economic climate - and it is one which has helped the ABC stay strong.

And that in turn has ensured that your audiences can still rely on you for quality news, information and entertainment.

And whether they live in the capital cities or in provincial towns or in the bush, whether they listen to the radio or watch TV - that is what they get.

That is a particular credit to Bob Somerville, Wendy McCarthy and to their Board - and I join Kim Beazley in thanking them for their energy and dedication over these years, and in welcoming the new Board members.

At the end of the day, however, credit for the ABC's achievement is, properly, shared by the whole Corporation.

And it is with the confident expectation that the Corporation as a whole will continue to serve the Australian people well that I have pleasure now in declaring open the ABC Ultimo Centre.

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