The ABC is important to Australia, it is highly regarded, and it represents a clear, inclusive way to bring our continental community togetherr to celebrate our unique culture. But it is difficult to do that while you are still living in the past and resistant to change.

The ABC is the pre- eminent broadcasting organization in the country, with extensive electronic resources that its commercial counterparts can only dream about. And with the advent of digital broadcast and telecast initiatives, it has the ability to develop, promote and sustain vast quantities of information and entertainment.

But to achieve this, the ABC should put aside traditional thinking, pull down the barriers and develop its resources further, form real partnerships and alliances with other local media and production companies, and welcome them into the ABC as equal partners.

Expelling external influences from the corridors of the ABC, such as the third force of the unions, is essential if the ABC is to inject conducive and creative democracy.

The ABC has a well-deserved reputation as a breeding ground for creative ideas and for people to flow into the commercial sector. While it should encourage more people to join the ABC, the Corporation also needs to abolish restrictive employment policies, establish a succession plan and a revolving-door policy that allows smooth entry and exit for people intent on careers in television and radio.

Although much attention is given to the perception of political bias in the ABC, the only groups that have a direct influence on the independence in the organization, in my opinion, are the unions. No other group, not even the governments of the day, can stride into the ABC, use the ABC’s airwaves, or participate in the selection of staff. I doubt that people in this country would know who the Commonwealth and Public Sector Union (CPSU) was if it weren’t for the ABC.

Much of the senior management of the ABC has come from the union ranks of the national broadcaster, and evolution has seen the unions come to dominate ABC management. While the two unions—the Media and Arts Alliance, representing journalists, and the CPSU, representing everyone else—have a stranglehold over staff in Sydney and Melbourne, they do not have the numbers elsewhere in the ABC. However if a national vote is taken in Sydney and Melbourne, staff can close down the ABC across the country.

The ABC needs to develop strategies that bring the warring factions in the organization together, once and for all, to deliver programs in a rational manner and ensure that they are implemented.

‘One ABC’, a tactical retreat into a homogeneous, indefinable bureaucracy, was Brian Johns’ idea. With the Government at the time eager to cut the ABC by $50 million, it was thought that an amorphous ABC would be difficult to dismember, and that sacking 25 per cent of the ABC’s management was a pathway for Brian Johns to sell the idea internally. By the time Johns left the ABC, management had been replaced and expanded, and the ABC was saddled with a $7 million stress-leave bill. It left an additional tier of management that Jonathan Shier removed, albeit at a reported cost of $25 million.

Radio is radio; television is television; and everything else supports both those divisions, including Enterprises and Content Management. The latter are not the main game. Both ABC Television and ABC Radio need to go down separate paths and develop
move to many of the RN transmitters and provide real-time news coverage across the continent.

It is a proven media strategy that the more local the content, the greater the chance of attracting an audience. Years of audience data show that news and current affairs programs are the principal reason that people are drawn to ABC Radio. Increasing news coverage at a local and State level would prove to be a cornerstone to audience growth.

And while some defenders of the traditions of the ABC may say that the ABC is not about ratings, it is about spending the public purse and performance, and the independent ratings agencies are in a better position to measure and report that performance.

Programming control of the national stations should be vested in the States—right down to regional stations

Like its commercial counterparts, ABC TV can separate its commercial activity from editorial content and still benefit from potential revenue. The SBS has been doing this for some time with success, and with little or no comment from critics as to the impact on its editorial integrity. The ABC Enterprises division has for some time peppered the airwaves with product-specific advertising. No one has complained and it hasn’t affected the independence of its news programs.

In a global market, the rest of the country is moving towards innovation and alliances. While the private sector is now establishing strategic innovation partnerships with government and educational institutions, the ABC should also be considering this as an option.

The ABC is at the crossroads, and with the appointment of the next managing director, it will have but one chance to carve out its place in the future. What that future holds will depend on his or her ability to quickly achieve the respect of the staff of the country’s largest media employer, and continue the reform process, while recognizing that audiences are the ABC’s principal equity.

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