

Friends of the

ABC

Blue Mountains Region June 2008

From the President ...

A family commitment did what wild horses could not – it kept Joan and I away from the ‘Fran Kelly Show’ at the Grandview on May 17. The feedback since suggests we missed something special. So much so that a transcript courtesy of Carole Goodwin is included in the newsletter. Thanks to Carole and also to Denise Thorpe who hosted the event. overflow audience of 120.

If you are one of the 120 who enjoyed Fran Kelly you will not want to miss our next major event. Jonathan Holmes and Monica Attard, two vastly experienced ABC journalists, have agreed to be panelists at our annual public forum at the Carrington on July 28, tentatively titled ‘Watching the Media – a critical view’. We harboured the thought that Neil Inall, who did such an outstanding job as compere last year, would agree to do so again, and he has.

Where’s the \$48.1 million?

2008 Budget Leaves ABC Behind

The May Federal Budget contained no funding increase for the national broadcaster, which will slip further behind as the result of the failure of its funding to keep up with increased costs.

“It is disappointing that the new Labor Government has failed even to begin to address the ABC’s funding inadequacy,” said Glenys Stradijot, a spokesperson for Friends of the ABC (Vic).

“Although the ABC is funded on a triennial basis, there is nothing to prevent the present government from increasing ABC funding part way into the broadcaster’s triennial funding round. The last government showed no hesitation in cutting the ABC’s funds mid-triennium.

We could not hope for a better panel to cast a discerning eye over developments in the media so make sure you and your friends get a ticket - you won’t be disappointed.

Current presenter of ABC-TV’s Media Watch Jonathan Holmes is the eighth in a distinguished list of ABC journalists to take the chair. Seventh in the list is none other than Monica Attard.

Jonathan was recruited from the BBC in 1982 and was executive producer of Four Corners from 1982-85. He has at different times since been executive producer of Foreign Correspondent and the 7.30 Report, and foreign correspondent in Washington DC.

Monica Attard made her name as the ABC’s correspondent in Russia and is the recipient of no less than four Walkley

Awards and an Order of Australia for her contribution to journalism.

Following her Russian experience Monica was involved with the AM and PM programs, Four Corners, Lateline and The World Today, including a stint as presenter of PM.

During 2006-7 Monica was presenter of Media Watch and she is currently presenting Sunday Profile on local radio.

If you signed one of the 534 letters highlighting your opposition to advertising on the ABC sent to the Minister following Springwood Foundation Day you will have received a reply, as no doubt have the other 533. We get another chance to raise the flag and keep it there through our Winter Magic stall at Katoomba on June 21.

Our next meeting is set for June 14, a week earlier than normal because of Winter Magic. I hope to see you there - we have a lot to work on.

Next Meeting:

Where: Grand View Hotel
Wentworth Falls

When: Saturday June 14

Time: 10.00am

“The Rudd Government is aware that the ABC is seriously under-funded just to maintain its existing depleted operations. Leaks from the 2006 KPMG report, commissioned by the Howard government, provided a scathing assessment of funding levels and said funding after indexation needed to rise \$48.1 million in 2008-09 in order for the ABC “to sustain its present outputs”.”

Repeats on ABC 1 have doubled in the past ten years. The level of first-run Australian drama on the national broadcaster last year was one-tenth of that which commercial networks are required to screen to maintain local culture.

“The ABC Board looks to be placing its focus for ABC funding on next year’s federal budget, which is the beginning of the ABC’s new funding triennium. That’s a risky strategy, particularly if pressure on the government to cut public expenditure turns out to increase by then,” said Glenys Stradijot.

Reprinted from FABC—Victoria Website: www.fabc.org.au/vic

**Pages 2-4: Full report on
A Conversation with Fran Kelly**

Great Conversation With Fran Kelly

Over 120 people had an opportunity to hear and question ABC journalist Fran Kelly at our last Friends' meeting." "Carole Goodwin outlines the conversation below:

Meeting opened: 10.35 a.m.

Welcome: by Denise Thorpe on behalf of Bob Macadam who was unable to attend.

Introduction:

Fran announced that she is four months shy of 20 years with the ABC, her career there beginning with a three-month stint with triple J. She then listed some of the changes she has seen in that time.

- Working in the AM/PM office where before going to air you had to rush into the telex room and grab the breaking news off the machine which was always crashing or breaking down, with the introduction for Paul Murphy to read being edited on the spot.

- Making radio: dragging the recording equipment with you, (resulting in Fran's bad back) armed with cutting block, splicing tape, Chinagraph

- Her first job in Canberra with Maxine McKew, John Shoveller, Michael Brisenden, with the mad rush to get Question Time to air. Fran's job was to record the 'grabs'

- Compare with today where computer and mobile phone reports can be sent straight to scanscript service

- A lot more is being done with a lot less; it is a leaner, meaner operation in all senses of the word, and more efficient.

- The audience spread is now much greater, but we have to ask what exactly are we getting out there? We need money for new content: drama, documentaries, news etc, not just shows brought in from elsewhere, but cuts to staff make

this increasingly impossible. Ultimately quality will be affected and we need to have emphasis on quality content. Fran sees this point as the main focus for effort from the FABC groups. The product is the most important thing.

- Talented young journalists are still being attracted to the ABC and need to be nurtured.

- There is not the money to travel to the stories and often the ABC has to rely on wire services. Compare with the BBC.

- The new Managing Director has a good vision

Questions:

1. **The Board appointments have been stacked in the Howard years. How has their influence affected the ABC?** Board stacking has gone on under Labor as well. Donald McDonald was a strong chairman who valued the ABC's independence. The new MD has appointed Paul Chadwick as bias supervisor, a journalist of great integrity, respected by all. The issue of Staff Representative is a ongoing, but there is a fight to get it back and we can rely on Quentin Dempster to persist.

2. **What is The Howard Years going to consist of?** It will be a general historical document, a bookend to the earlier *Labor In Power*, where Labor politicians were extremely frank. The Liberals are less open. It will deal with the good and the bad, the government achievements and how it changed the country,

3. **Are the commercials shown for ABC programs on radio, TV a hidden agenda?** The Board members are not interested in advertising. Michael Kroeger wanted to introduce ads but could not get his way so left the Board.

4. **There seem to be a disproportionate number of female presenters on the ABC. Is this the sisterhood at work?**

Most have long memories of the attitude to female journalists and Fran was able to

list a number of well-known and respected male journalists to counter this one.

5. **Is there much interaction between Government ministers and the ABC? Do they depend on each other?** John Howard if he had a serious message to get out, would go on AM/Radio National. Kevin Rudd is not interested at the moment, preferring to get his message out as widely as possible on other media outlets, but will come back. John Howard never avoided going on The 7.30 Report with Kerry O'Brien even with the difficult issues. All politicians listen to AM/PM, Radio National and respond. Are reporters too chummy with the politicians? No, they have respect and share cordial relations.

6. **The ABC shops are appearing as part of Dymocks. How much money is the ABC gaining through doing this and is advertising revenue involved?** Fran thinks that the ABC has had an arrangement with Dymocks for some time to allow ABC Enterprises products to be sold in their bookshops, but cannot answer this question, suggesting going to ABC Online to check. However, she stated that the new MD wants compatibility between on-air talent and ABC Enterprises.

7. **How did your earlier life as Arts graduate, band member and Events**



Manager prepare you for the world of journalism? Fran was always interested in radio and after pursuing her earlier career through her twenties, realised that she was passionate about radio. She had no media degree but had life experience and enthusiasm. She had a

lead story on her first week in journalism; in the right place at the right time. When working at JJJ her earlier experience in the music scene helped. Helen Thomas, on "The Drum" taught Fran journalism. It is a skill that cannot always be learnt in a course – life experience and skills are important.

8. There is a huge turnover in the Canberra Press gallery. Where are the older members with corporate memory? The younger journalists work like a pack and focus only on certain issues. People burn out and there is less of an avenue for long-term journalism. Career change is encouraged. However there is a new group of talent coming up: Laura Tingle, Tony Wright, Paul Davy, Annabelle Crab, Chris Ullman

9. When surveys of people we trust the most are taken, journalists are low on the list. How does this make you feel? In Fran's experience this is a shame and not a reflection of what people really think. Having said that, at the time of the Thredbo disaster she saw a tabloid journalist commit an outrageous breach of trust. Story beat-ups also give journalism a bad name.

10. The standard of journalism has fallen. There is a lack of sub-editing. Cadets have poor writing skills. Fran agrees with this comment. Her partner has worked recently as a sub, whose job was just to make sure the copy fits the space; there is no sub-editing, no sending it back to the reporter for improvement, there is no editorial leadership. Writing standards are a reflection of educational standards. Another problem is that free-lance fees are very low and it often takes three months to get the cheque. ABC TV has a problem when producers are editorial, not picture producers as they do not see the value of a good image.

11. Comparing "Insiders" with Jim Lowe's program from the USA as shown on SBS is informative. Whereas the American program has right-wing columnists who can comment intelligently on events there, "Insiders" has two commentators whose names will not be mentioned, who are so partisan as to be a joke and will never give credibility to anyone from Labor. Comment? "Insiders" has a format which it follows and effort is made

to have commentators from both sides of politics. The problem in Australia is that there is a lack of right-wing commentary with rigor. There are not many to choose from. The producers mix around the chair. Andrew Bolton occasionally brings more rigor to some of the questions.

12. In the series "Face to Face" which consisted of interviews by journalists of various Australians in a series of 40-minute interviews, you chose Patrick Dodson. Why was he chosen? The interview was recorded in 1999. Fran chose him because of a meeting she had had with him and a media advisor at a dinner for journalists, after which 12 went with him to the Kimberley. They stayed on a cattle station run by the local aboriginal tribe and talked with them for two days, which helped them understand the Mabo and Wik debates. Patrick was broad-minded, open, genuine, intelligent and articulate and this impressed Fran.

13. What was your most satisfying/challenging interview? No one particular interview stands out. Paul Keating was a challenge: he never wanted to get up early to do an interview. On one such interview, he launched a blistering attack on Fran herself and once off-air, Fran asked him why he did this. His reply was that it was a morning interview and you needed to wake people up. A special interview she

remembers was during the Athens Olympics. Jana Pitman had just run her race and had come in third and was standing crying and talking to her support team. Fran watched her pain, thinking she should not intervene, but finally introduced herself, asking the question which a good journalist should never ask: "How do you feel?" and got three minutes of perfect radio. She then had to run all the way back to the studio (she lost 8 kg during the Olympics) and fling it on air, a perfect scoop.

14. How has the National Security/Terrorist legislation affected reporters' ability to record the facts? Security legislation has been around for quite a while. (Fran then mentioned a case involving Carmel Travers when ASIO destroyed computers on the grounds of National Security, which involved fines, gaol sentences, but I didn't get all the details.) Has there been any change in the Gov't capacity in this area and how much pressure do governments apply? Howard Gov't pursued National Security vigorously. (Harvey McManus). Gareth Evans issued a "D" notice when he was in office. New laws have changed the rules again. Fran has an instinct that the Rudd Gov't is less emphatic about stopping FOI's and has issued fewer threats and made fewer moves against journalists. But journalists have to be careful: Sally Neighbour in the



Jack Thomas case became the instrument of something she did not want to happen (stiffer penalties for Thomas.) After Hanif case, the AFP has its reputation in tatters and is on the back foot.

15. Has there been any political interference with the Board's operations? Over the past 20 years the Board has generally stood up for the ABC staff e.g. The Chaser team at the APEC summit received Board backing. There was interference in the publishing of "Jones Town". Shier once tried to pull a 4 Corners program but Max Utrich stood up to him and was backed by Donald McDonald. Michael Kroeger tried to stifle certain people, programs, but Fran has not felt the hand of the Board in her reporting. John Howard's press team did apply some pressure: in a Howard interview, when Fran interrupted the PM, she was told off by them. Howard also succeeded in getting some Canberra correspondents sidelined.

16. When interviewing politicians why don't they answer the question? Fran's technique is to ask clear, direct questions one, twice (rarely) 3 times. Audience will realise that the answer is not forthcoming.

17. Can you compare the Howard/Rudd press teams? Rudd is young, inexperienced, under pressure. He also likes control. It is hard to get the necessary confirmation of an interview the night

before, In the run-up to the ideas summit the team was only told 10 – 12 minutes before the program went to air that Rudd would come on it, so questions rushed. Howard was straightforward to deal with, on the case, but all gov'ts get into bad habits. Howard was fair to the ABC but preferred AAP.

18. How do you prepare for your program? The producer in Canberra rings up the night before, when Fran has a talk about the major issues, questions, reads briefs from the producer. In the morning she talks to the Executive Producer and refines the day's broadcast.

19. Your whole life seems to be taken up with being a presenter. How do you feel about that? Fran is well aware of the impact on her life; she is often exhausted and it is not good for work/life balance; however, "it's the only gig in town," She loves it – it is fun, challenging, interesting. She also has greater editorial input than most.

Her day:

- Alarm at 3.45
- Into office by 4.50 where she listens to news, scans papers
- Pre-records items from 5.15 – 5.30
- Writes opener 5.30
- On air 6
- Off air 8.30
- Editorial meeting 9.30 - 10.15
- Prepares promo.

- Leaves office 10.30
- During day, watches news, listens to PM, talks to producer in Canberra, and then cycle begins again.

20. How can we engage with the ABC and promote it as a product? There is no money for promotion. Fran's breakfast program has a 3.6% audience share in Sydney. Proposed new platforms will reach a different audience.

21. Is there a lot of danger associated with being a foreign correspondent and do people have to be co-opted or do they do it by choice? There is fierce competition; a new person has just been appointed from a strong field. All correspondents have to do a Dangerous Environment Course – Fran's was run by ex_SAS officers in Britain – where they learn first aid and survival skills. (The best place to hide from gunfire is behind the engine of a car as bullets do not penetrate right through.)

22. What is your expectation of future funding for the ABC? Fran is hopeful. When she asked Steve Conroy about it, he told her to look forward to the next funding round. He has made no promises, but is trying, listening.

23. When will you return to Radio National Breakfast? Monday 4th August.

Vote of thanks: given by Carole Goodwin along with a small presentation on behalf of the branch.

Meeting closed: 12.10 p.m.



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