

# Friends of the ABC

Blue Mountains Region August 2007

## From the President...

The Speakers Forum at the Carrington – what a buzz. We hoped for an audience of 100, were chuffed by ticket pre-sales of 140 and stunned by a packed house of around 165.

Feedback after and since is universally positive, including that of our guests:

“We enjoyed the occasion, the hotel, the Katoomba ambience and the passion of so many people for the ABC and its independence (what a turn-out!). I must say it made me think that occasions like that should be recorded and turned into something so its on the record”... Peter Manning

“You’re certainly correct with the observation that I probably enjoyed interacting with the people at The Carrington last Saturday. Thank you very much for a stimulating Saturday” ... John Highfield

“As you well know, I enjoy very few things more than good company and critical discourse: and that event provided both.” ... Richard Bawden

“Good on you for getting such a large crowd together on Saturday...and what an enthusiastic and interested lot! Highfield and Manning certainly related some frightening stories, didn’t they? Anyway I hope the day was satisfactory for your branch... I reckon it ought to be very pleased with itself” ... Neil Inall

The Forum was a success on any criteria – attendance; atmosphere; level and quality of participation, discourse and outcomes; and enhanced status of Blue Mountains FABC.

Included in this Newsletter is Carole Goodwin’s summary of issues canvassed . There will be an opportunity during the August 18 meeting to discuss the implications.

The organizing sub-group will have a particular sense of satisfaction and I want to thank them on behalf of our branch – Carole Goodwin and Bev Plaizier managed the ticketing and the raffle; Bev Plaizier, Julia McGill and Mariella Eberl worked with Janelle Clark to publicise the Forum and spread the word; Denise Thorpe and Bob Foster played a key role with information technology and music, and John Stafford closed a great deal with the Carrington. The group worked as a team and supported each other through some stressful moments. There were of course significant inputs across our entire membership and I want to acknowledge that of my wife Joan in particular.

We must acknowledge also the generosity of our raffle sponsors – John Stafford, Blue Mist in Wentworth Falls and Yindi Spa at the Carrington. We received good support from the

Blue Mountains Gazette through Damien Madigan and Priscilla Lagatule and her Carrington staff did us proud. Andy Busitill’s music during tea capped an enjoyable afternoon.

An outline of the financial aspects of the day will be presented at the August 18 meeting and is likely to include a boost to our bank balance.

**A couple of dates to remember – September 22 to ‘Meet the Federal Election Candidates’ and hear their views on public broadcasting policy; and November 17 when social commentator Hugh Mackay will be guest speaker at our AGM.**

## Next Meeting:

**10 am, 18 August,  
Grand View Hotel  
Wentworth Falls**

### Agenda:

1. Welcome and apologies.
2. Forum reports – Discussion: How can the Forum observations be promoted?
3. Minutes and business arising.
4. Financial report.
5. Correspondence and business arising.
6. General business.



# Speakers' Forum-Notes by Secretary, Carole Goodwin

Welcome

Bob Macadam welcomes the panel and audience.

Mal Hewitt, acting President of FABC NSW State Branch, introduces himself and welcomes members, encouraging those who have not yet joined to do so.

Neill Inall is introduced by Bob Macadam as the moderator and he then defines the topic after Bob explains that the gender imbalance on the panel was despite all efforts to have an equal number of male and female speakers.



*John Highfield*

## **SPEAKERS' ADDRESS**

### **JOHN HIGHFIELD –**

• At the beginning of his time as a reporter, John found the ABC to be adventuresome, with all having a say and input into programs, Bias and issues still existed, but there was a natural balance between liberal and conservative views, no longer seen today.

• The ABC is still a shiny beacon when compared to commercial stations but it's main feature is now timidity because of government pressure, noticeable for the pre-emptive knee buckle.

Example 1: Sandy McCutcheon, presenter of the popular program Australia Talks Back was asked by ABC management to change the mix of his program so that there were fewer callers, more studio voices. Sandy refused so his program replaced by the current Australia Talks.

Example 2: Monday Conference used to be a hard-hitting program but is now replaced on air by Jeff Mc Mullen's Difference of Opinion. Those wishing to participate in the audience have to submit to a questionnaire (see ABC Website) which includes questions on: – Voting intention ! – Level of education ! – Country of birth ! The program is completely controlled.

**PETER MANNING** – sees the ABC as a crucial element of our society and democracy. It remains advertisement-free because of the pressure from FABC and staff within the ABC organisation. However, space taken up at present by in-house advertisements perfectly fits that required for a commercial time-slot. Peter sees

the ABC as providing four essentials.

- Broadcasting to all Australia: At present, missing is:
    - Non-English speaking programs. A third of Sydney, Melbourne's populations are from and ESL background.
    - programs for people on lesser incomes.
    - Drama. the department has been run down
    - Sold out on Australian sport
    - Few documentaries
    - No programs for young Australians: ABC is cradle and grave.
  - Independence: The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal monitors programs, but now ABC has set up it's own unit to monitor bias, an Orwellian situation. The stacking of the board is an outrage, but now management is being stacked as well. Although Senator Coonan has promised there will be no advertising on the ABC 'for the moment' it is already creeping in on-line.
  - Transparency: Freedom of Information requests are ignored. This should be an open process.
  - Editorial freedom: The Managing Director is also now the chief editor.
    - Editorial freedom should be in the hands of program editors.
    - The legal Department is now weak.
    - Chasing ratings has become a major obsession and content therefore suffers.
    - Four Corners has lost it's investigative edge.
- Peter concluded by posing the question: Should the ABC and SBS combine? The latter station is doing much better with locally-produced drama than the 7 hours the ABC has managed.

**RICHARD BAWDEN** - opened with several provocative statements regarding the role of the media in democracy:

- Broadcasting is dead. We cannot rely on radio, TV, newspapers
    - Democracy must move beyond opinion to judgement. Representative democracy is skewed and no longer works.
    - Education is politicised, ignored, dumbed down, so people are no longer able to deliberate.
- His conclusions: Conversation is the way forwards and governance in every form should facilitate this.
- We have to reconsider the nature of democracy, Governance should be by the people involved in debate and action. This can be done through the Internet.
  - The issues facing us are contextual and the way we view the world has to change.
  - Is there still a role for the ABC?

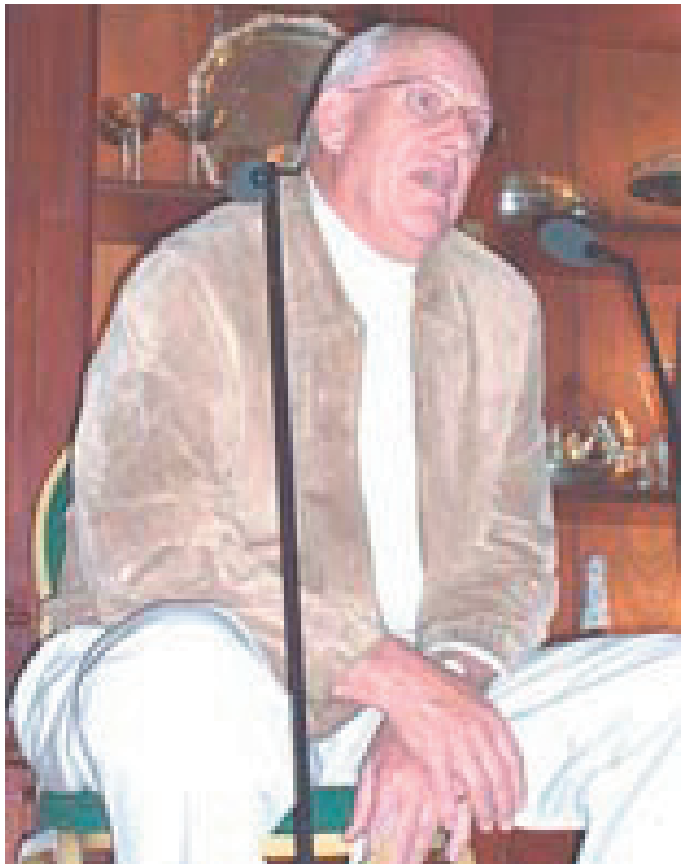
## **PANEL RESPONSES TO ISSUES RAISED**

- The ABC is already involved with the Internet through podcasting, but this has a potential problem, as US audiences downloading podcasts of programs now outstrips the Australian numbers. Will this be reflected in the programming?
- Newspapers now have blogs and their on-line content is steadily growing.
- TV News is entertainment rather than hard-hitting news. ABC news is lazy, late and parochial. 7.00 pm news is repeated in later updates and in Lateline, despite the fact that countries in the Northern Hemisphere have started their day. News is parochial: crime news etc at the expense of international, federal and economic items. News feeds are shrinking; there are now only four TV news agencies worldwide and the same feeds are seen on all channels.

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## Speakers' Forum Continued

- There are problems with institutions which do not have to answer to democratic processes. The largest mercenary army in the world, Blackwater Incorporated, based in West Virginia, is answerable to nobody.
- Democracy involves interactivity. There is still a need for journalism. What are the powerful doing? Investigative journalism will always have a role. Commercial priorities should not rot the process of news. There is a risk of losing our democracy – whistleblowers are legislated against.
- Blogging: because the Internet cannot be controlled, issues can be brought out into the open in countries such as Russia, China.
- Broadcasting is becoming Narrowcasting, targeting particular groups.
- In Australia the cost of broadband and slow speeds cut many off from democratic processes.



*Richard Bawden*

### QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

- The Lebanese are misrepresented in the media. What can be done to change this? Peter Manning recommends his book: *Us and Them – a Journalist's Investigation of Media, Muslims and the Middle East*.
- How do we prevent commercials on the ABC? John suggests:  
1. Write letters 2. Vote Labor 3. Be aware that advertising slots are already included in ABC programming.
- How do we ensure democracy in the Parliamentary process? We need Independents like Peter Andren in parliament and we should insist that the mainstream media give attention to all parties.
- Staffing is gagged through funding and threatened by Australian Workplace agreements. There is a loss of a generation of communicators with the closing of the section training journalists. The panel disagreed about the future role of the ABC. Richard argued that it would continue to be politicised and that power

needs to be given to the people, but Peter said that 20 million cannot all participate in democracy and that there is the need for institutions to help inform. There should be a reinvigoration of the ABC through generational change. John saw the need to protect us from the Tower of Babel effect of everyone putting in their opinions. Content will be king so there is a need to train up young people to give focus, purpose and direction with journalistic training once more becoming important.

- Education for citizenship doesn't exist. There is a need to break the power of the two-party system. There should be more involvement in democracy, and here education should play a role, as until this occurs the ABC cannot be reinvigorated.
- How can we get the balance so that there is an alternative view for young people influenced by poor media?
- At present there is a culture of fear in the ABC after the attacks about perceived bias from Senator Alston and other right-wingers.



## FABC Committee

President – Bob Macadam 47541620

macadamr@bigpond.net.au

Secretary – Carole Goodwin 47512680

Treasurer – Julia McGill

Membership Secretary – Janelle Clark

Publicity Officers – Bev. Plazier and Dave Davidson.

Merchandise Officer –  
Joan Macadam.

Web Officer & Newsletter –  
Publisher – Bob Foster.

Vice President / Newsletter Editor – Colin Bull.

## Find our Branch on the Web!

How to find us:

Go to the *NSW Friends of the ABC*

[www.fabcnsw.org.au/](http://www.fabcnsw.org.au/)

Click on *Local Branches* & click on *Blue Mountains* webpage.



*Part of the Speakers' Forum audience*