

## ACTION ALERT AA 19-9: NEW LEGISLATION ON THE ABC

*As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.*

August 2019

Legislation is currently before Parliament to add further pressure on the ABC by extending its regional coverage without sufficient extra funding. Legislation is also foreshadowed to require 'fair and balanced' reporting. This Alert outlines this legislation and some responses to it, and suggests action that might be taken.

### The Legislation

On 31 July 2019 the Coalition government re-introduced the Australian Broadcasting Corporate Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill. Previous versions failed to pass Parliament in recent years. According to the explanatory memorandum with the Bill, it will amend the ABC Charter to "ensure that the ABC's broadcasting programs contribute to a sense of regional as well as national identity, and reflects the geographic as well as cultural diversity of the Australian community". The Bill also creates a Regional Advisory Council to ensure this is achieved, and requires the ABC to report annually the numbers employed in regional and metropolitan areas and the ratio of journalists to support staff.

The legislation (currently in the House of Representatives) means that the ABC Board must consult the Advisory Council before changing its service in a regional area that might have a significant impact on audiences in that area. The ABC Board itself will have to ensure that at least two of its non-executive directors have a substantial link with a regional area.

### Comment

In a response when the Bill was introduced, an ABC spokesman said (on [adioninfo.com.au](http://adioninfo.com.au)):

"The ABC is unparalleled in its service to regional Australians. While commercial media retreats from rural and regional Australia, the ABC's commitment is stronger than ever. This Bill is identical to one introduced to Parliament in 2017. Despite further cuts to its budget over the last two years the ABC has increased its investment in regional media by \$15m per annum, creating an additional 80 jobs".

In an article published on *The Conversation* website on 18 October 2019, Fiona Martin and Michael Ward (University of Sydney) make the following points:

- The proposed changes are unnecessary, given the basic independence already given to the ABC.
- The changes are designed to tie up the corporation in red tape and shift its attention away from national coverage.
- The expected funding to be offered for this change (\$100,000) is inadequate to expand local services across the country.
- There have been numerous pressures on the ABC already – e.g. six funding reductions, two efficiency reviews, calls for it to sell its property, and police raids.
- Further legislation is expected to be re-introduced (largely to satisfy Senator Hanson’s One Nation Party) despite being rejected in 2017. This will duplicate existing balance and fairness provisions of the ABC’s editorial policies by adding a mandate that news reporting should be ‘fair and balanced’.
- There needs to be a comprehensive analysis of media and communications services for regional, rural and remote communities.
- The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Digital Platforms Inquiry said that the ABC and SBS should be funded “to compensate for the decline in local reporting previously produced by traditional commercial publishers”.

### **Action**

1. *Contact your MP or Senator and make known your concern at these moves to place undue pressure on the ABC to modify its work in ways that are ad hoc, inappropriate, and unnecessary in view of its existing Charter.*
2. *Contact the ABC via its website ([www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)) or by mail or phone to let them know of your support for their ongoing role in relation to news coverage and geographical spread.*
3. *Send a message to the Prime Minister (see [www.pm.gov.au](http://www.pm.gov.au)) and Leader of the Opposition ([a.albanese@aph.gov.au](mailto:a.albanese@aph.gov.au)) expressing your concern about the frequent attempts to place undue pressure on the ABC, including cuts in funding.*

Canberra  
October 2019