

Towards a new National Cultural Policy Public Consultation: ABC Alumni Submission

Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of the ABC Alumni organisation. ABC Alumni is an association of former Australian Broadcasting Corporation workers who believe passionately in the importance of a well-funded and independent national broadcaster as a vital part of Australian democracy. While not formally connected to the ABC, we have worked since formation in 2018 to advocate for the importance of public service media, especially the ABC, as a key component of a diverse Australian media system.

This submission focusses on the role of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as a central contributor to Australian cultural life.

As stated in *Revive*, the ABC and SBS “play an important role in shaping Australia’s national identity, fostering social inclusion and encouraging myriad forms of cultural expression” (Cth., 2023, p. 87).

This submission focusses on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) contribution to that role and as “a trusted source of news, information and entertainment” (Cth., 2023, p. 87).

Introduction

As noted in Arts Minister Burke’s introductory message to the consultation paper, this is a historical moment, as Australia will for the first time have consecutive cultural policies (Cth, 2023). It is equally significant to note that the diversity and prominence of national cultural identities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are confronted by a profoundly complex set of challenges.

These challenges encompass issues such as the expansion of transnational digital platforms that present new forms of cultural hegemony as local content creators face greater challenges to develop, produce and present their work.

In addition to international content dominance, technological convergence has seen the rise of social media use that while providing substantial benefits, is also leading to increasing levels of harm and a decline in institutional trust. The decline in trust is undermining democracy and fuelling ancient hatreds and discriminatory practices that have metamorphosed into abuse, harassment and worse in the online space.

It is significant that the ABC and SBS are among Australia’s leading and most trusted media organisations.

While these challenges are not unique to Australia, they confront not simply cultural diversity but social cohesion, harmony and respect.

In tandem with other aspects of public policy, an articulated national cultural policy underpinned by a comprehensive policy framework provides an important bulwark against such threats.

The consultation

The consultation has sought comment on:

- “the challenges and opportunities you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you
- “why the five pillars around which the cultural policy will continue to be structured
- “what you would like to see reflected in the next National Cultural Policy.

The following comments are provided in relation to the role of the ABC and the five pillars.

Pillar 1 First Nations First

ABC Alumni supports the importance of Australia’s National Cultural Policy that recognises and respects “the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia’s arts and culture” (Cth., 2026, p. 6).

We believe that the ABC has a critical role to play in continuing to “reflect First Nations priorities, strengthen recognition of cultural rights, recognise the centrality of language to culture, and support pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape.”

As noted by the ABC in its last annual report, its contribution includes coverage of events such as “the Garma Festival in the Northern Territory” (ABC, 2025, p. 25) and “coverage of NAIDOC Week 2024, ... the NAIDOC Awards and showcasing” (ABC, 2025, p. 33) Indigenous content across platforms and through series and programs.

Pillar 2 A Place for Every Story

As a component of Pillar 2, Australian cultural policy should include commitments to ensuring every aspect of artistic and cultural expression is promoted and supported, from the training and development of arts workers, arts content development and production, and the promotion and delivery of work to the community.

The ABC can play an ongoing role in such promotion and support, including through content across platforms that supports the dissemination of discussion and criticism of arts activities, and the promotion of artistic activities and events.

Pillar 3 Centrality of the Artist

In contributing to Pillar 3, the ABC has played and should continue to play a key role in the promotion and presentation of artists, artistic works and the place of the arts and cultural activity in Australian life.

In addition to narratives about the work of artists and their work, that provide increased recognition across the community, the ABC’s role includes ensuring the challenges and issues confronting Australian artists and cultural workers is prominently featured.

Pillar 4 Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The ABC Alumni believes the objectives and aspirations in Pillar 4 are central to articulating the importance and centrality of the ABC as a part of national cultural life. Along with other national cultural institutions it is essential that the ABC, as core part of cultural infrastructure, is able to partner with other organisations and the artistic and cultural community. That partnership and support role can only be sustained through the maintenance of real levels of public investment in the ABC.

Pillar 5 Engaging the Audience

Again, the Alumni organisation believes the ABC has a key role in contributing to the enhancement and extension of opportunities for the representation of Australian cultural and artistic practice. Through its local, regional, national and international distribution the ABC is uniquely placed as a public institution to make “sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad” (Cth., 2026, p. 7).

Drawing together our statements about the National Cultural Policy pillars we note the significance of the ABC’s role as a national cultural institution.

In the section below we focus on the importance of providing for the future security of the ABC for Australians by ensuring adequate funding and passing legislation that secures ABC independence.

ABC funding, national cultural policy and national identity

One of the 2023 *Revive Policy* ‘Actions’ was to “[p]rovide security of funding and independence for Australia’s national broadcasters, ABC and SBS, by delivering five-year funding terms, and reinstating indexation for ABC funding” (p. 89).

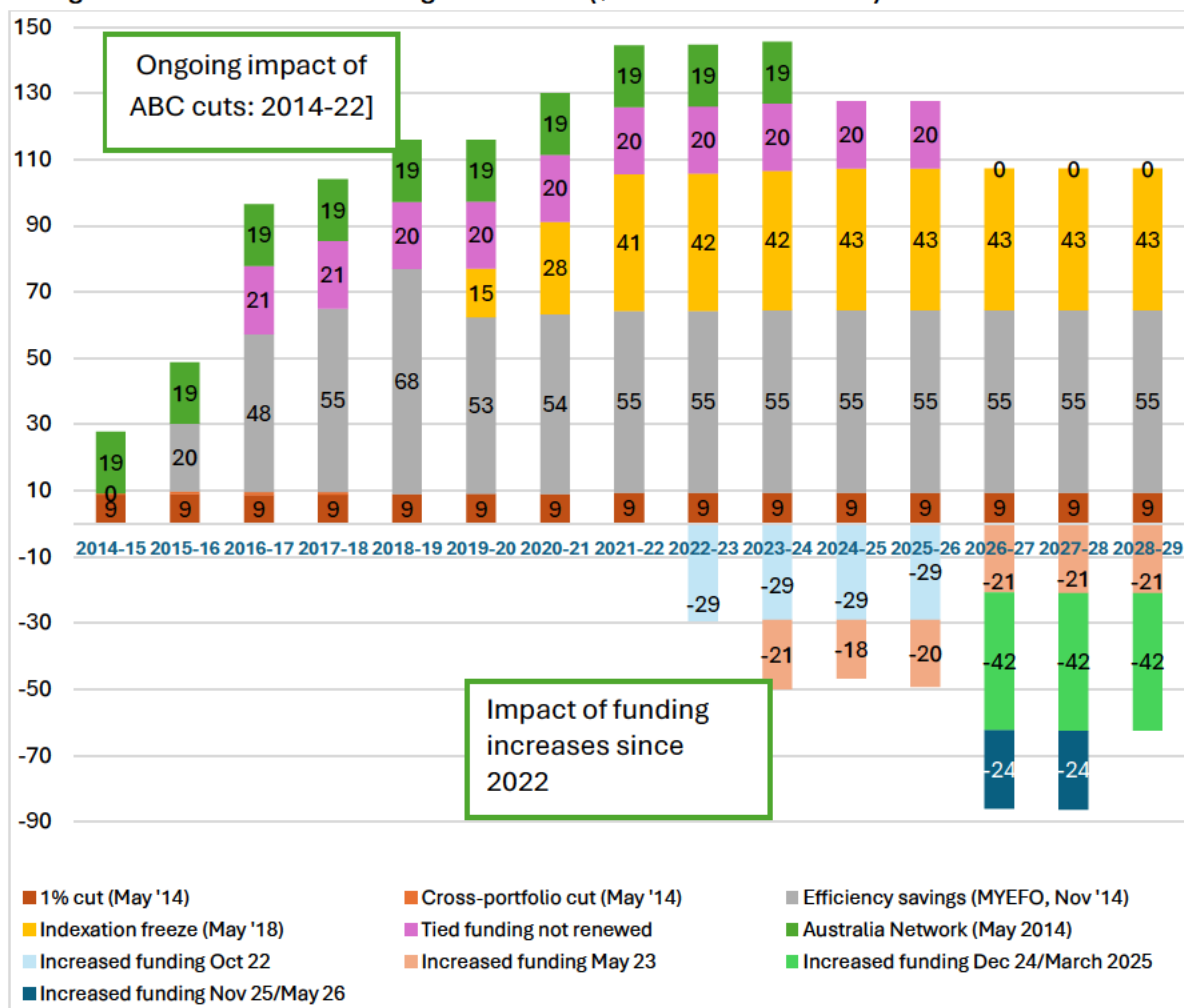
It is anticipated the former will be legislated in 2026 and the latter was part of the funding improvements implemented by the Albanese government since its election in 2022.

Restoration of the three years of lost indexation funding (over \$86 million) was a fundamental aspect of the long process of restoring ABC funding to its previous levels.

As important as the increased funding for the ABC has been, it is necessary to record that the ABC still languishes behind the real level of funding it received prior to the Coalition government’s ‘one billion dollar’ cuts (2014-22).

This is because, as the graph (Figure 1 over page) shows, while the current government has already provided an extra \$260 million since 2022/23 (to 2026/27), this does not offset past funding reductions.

Figure 1 Cuts to the ABC funding & Increases (\$m: 2014-15 to 2028-29)



Sources: Budget papers (ABC PBS) and Senate Estimates Questions on Notice, various years.

The ABC’s annual budget, in real terms, remains at historically low levels.

Figure 2 (over page) shows the real levels of ABC funding since 1982/83. The ABC operational budget in 2026/27 is at its second lowest level in forty-four years.¹

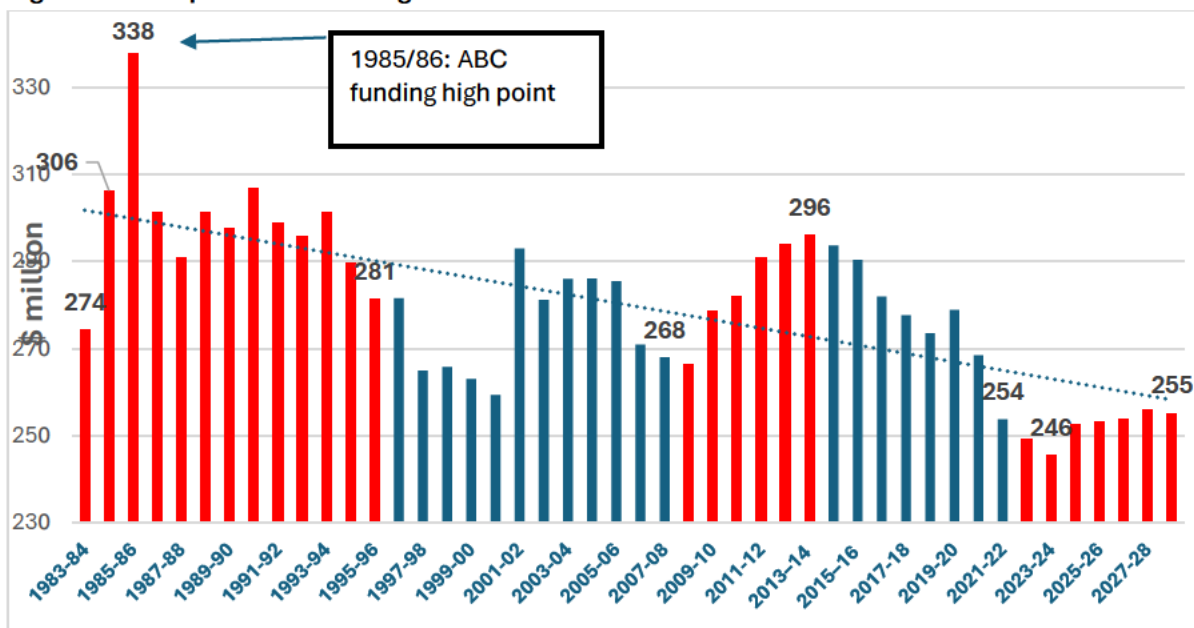
While funding levels have stabilised, the impact of the previous decade is clear: real funding is down by almost 15 per cent since 2013/14.

As an example, if the ABC received the same real level of operational funding this coming year as in 2013/14 (\$861 million), it would be allocated almost \$1.245 billion, approximately \$180 million more than the Budget allocation.

It is recognised that funding decisions are not within the scope of a national cultural policy document. Nonetheless, the severity of the funding issues confronting the ABC must be addressed if it is to play its cultural role to the fullest.

¹ The lowest real level of ABC funding since 1982/83 was \$246 million in 2023/24.

Figure 2: ABC operational funding in real terms from 1982 to 2028/29



Sources: Sources: ABC Operating Revenue 2006/07 to 2028/29: Portfolio Budget Statement relevant year. 1983-4 to 2005-06: Jolly, 2006, pp. 58-59. 2023-24 to 2027-28 as per PBS: 2024; updated with PBS March 2025 & May 2026.

The ABC’s contribution to screen culture

Despite the funding difficulties it has confronted over the past years, the ABC has remained a major commissioner of Australian screen cultural content. In 2023, *Revive* recognised that “[s]maller, independent film and television productions are struggling to get made and be seen as production costs are increasing and traditional revenue streams are stagnating” (p. 88). It noted that the ABC was responsible for six of the seven Australian children’s drama commissioned that year in 2020/21.

Analysing industry data, over the past years the situation for the screen cultural production sector has become even more difficult (Screen Australia, 2026). Government initiatives to enhance content regulation by introducing an Australian content rule for streaming services, as noted in *Revive*, will make an important contribution to increasing local content levels. Nonetheless, the national broadcasters can and should play a key role in co-financing and commissioning Australian programs, especially First Nations content.

Notwithstanding funding issues, the ABC and SBS have become the main domestic ‘broadcasting’ sources of funding for independent Australian drama (Screen Australia, 2024). Extra funding provided from 2026/27 for the ABC will assist in continuing to commission independent production.

The public broadcasters, ABC and SBS, have become the leading Australian commissioners of Australian drama and Australian children’s drama programming. Further, while financial data is not generally available, it is clear the ABC and SBS lead in the provision of quality documentary, factual and educational programming.

Conclusion

The ABC Alumni strongly supports the Government's initiative in developing and reconstituting a national cultural policy.

We also support the recognition of the key role of the national broadcasters as part of the national cultural strategy.

We strongly recommend, that to ensure the national broadcasters can fulfil their role, that legislative certainty as noted above be provided.

We further recommend that the real level of ABC funding be fully restored to enable it more fully play its role as one of Australia's most important cultural institutions.

References

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