



Not so special anymore: The demise of SBS television

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Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) was created as an independent statutory authority by the Fraser Government's special amendment to the Broadcasting Act of 1942, on 1 January 1978. Its establishment followed a series of rapid developments in both broadcasting and immigration policy in Australia, which began under the Whitlam Government in 1972, and led to the formation of community and ethnic broadcasting, and to the entrenchment of the policy of multiculturalism at the centre of immigration and settlement programs for the next three decades.

Since its inception, SBS has contributed to what Professor Andrew Jakubowicz of the University of Technology, Sydney, has called a 'shift in the understanding' of what it is to be Australian. He has described SBS as 'simply the most outstanding expression of multiculturalism as policy'.¹

The strongest motivation for the creation of SBS was almost certainly political in nature, and derived from Fraser's need to establish his government's credentials as socially progressive and culturally tolerant following the dismissal in 1975 of the Whitlam Government, which had done so much for migrant Australians in three short years. But to dismiss Fraser's attention to multicultural Australia, and to the needs of migrant Australians identified in the 1978 *Report of the Review of Post-arrival Programs and Services to Migrants*², which Fraser commissioned from Melbourne QC Frank Galbally, as politically expedient, ignores the then Prime Minister's commitment to human rights and cultural diversity. It also understates the real bi-partisan nature of support for multiculturalism in Australia for more than 20 years. Without the recognition and acceptance of multiculturalism as a central tenet of Australia's emerging cultural identity in the 1970s and 1980s, SBS would never have existed.

¹ Jakubowicz, Andrew & Goodall, Heather & Martin, Jeannie & Mitchell, Tony & Randall, Lois & Seneviratne, Kalinga, *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, Andrew Jakubowicz (Ed.), St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 1994. p. 136

² Galbally, Francis, *Migrant Services and Programs: Report of the Review of Post-arrival Programs and Services to Migrants*, Melbourne: Clearing House on Migration Issues, 1978.

By establishing a public broadcaster intended to act as a tool for the expression and celebration of multiculturalism as government policy, the Fraser Government showed great foresight: a prescient grasp of a rapidly globalising world, and of the role of television, and developing media technologies, in promoting intercultural communication and understanding as an essential part of nation building. The broadcasting service established in Australia in 1978 was very special indeed.

Almost 30 years later, Australians are entitled to ask if SBS remains as special, or even as relevant, as it once was. Recent changes to on-screen programming to allow in-program advertisement breaks, and the acrimonious departure of the network's most well-known on screen personality—arguably the 'Face of SBS'—Mary Kostakidis, have left viewers irate and observers bewildered. While the management team, under former NZTV chief Shaun Brown, has been actively pursuing higher ratings for more than two years, with a particular focus on the 'youth' audience, the official ratings figures for 2007 show that SBS's audience share remained static on 5.5 per cent, while the ABC had a real improvement in its audience in the 18-49 demographic, and posted an overall increase of 1.2 per cent for the year.³

Brown caused a minor stir recently when he appeared to be supporting advertising on the ABC⁴—although in fact, he was merely pleading the case for his own controversial changes to advertising on the nation's junior public broadcaster. These changes are the result of the SBS board's questionable re-interpretation of the network's charter definition of 'natural breaks' in programming: where previous boards understood this clause to refer only to breaks *between* programs, the current board, none of whom have a public broadcasting background, have reinterpreted this clause to allow those responsible for scheduling to insert advertisements *within* programs. Such 'natural breaks' are now made even in programs made originally for the commercial-free BBC, or within feature films and documentaries, and always occur at roughly equal intervals. Allowing for one break

³ See http://blogs.smh.com.au/sit/archives/2007/12/tribal_mind_special_the_offici.html Accessed 8 December 2007.

⁴ Reported in The Age on 27 November 2007. See: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/abc-should-run-ads-sbs-boss/2007/11/27/1196036888343.html>

in a half-hour program and three in an hour-long broadcast, the process of identifying ‘natural breaks’ is clearly arbitrary and determined according to advertising needs rather than in accordance with the original intention of the film- and program-makers.

This development has finally riled some of SBS’s more ‘cosmopolitan’ supporters to protest against the creeping dilution of the station’s purpose and practice that has been a source of anger within SBS’s primary audience of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds for years. Save Our SBS⁵, which was formed by two Australian television professionals, has so far had a hard time gaining the support of the Ethnic Communities Councils that represent SBS’s original constituency, highlighting an ongoing dichotomy in the fortunes of SBS. While the ‘elite consumer’ audience has been infuriated by the interruptions to programs, it remained largely silent while SBS’s multicultural and multilingual programming was neutered in favour of more cosmopolitan fare, meaning that now, when the network most needs the support of its audience, that audience has been split in two.

In short, after more than 20 years since the last significant or objective review of SBS’s services was undertaken by the Australian government—the 1986 report by the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA), *The Impact of Multicultural Television*⁶—SBS finds itself operating in a policy vacuum, valiantly trying to respond to the competing demands of a tiny and fractured audience, while mollifying the antediluvian cultural sensibilities of a government that was inherently hostile to its existence.

Originally known as the Independent and Multicultural Broadcasting Corporation, or IMBC, SBS had a purpose unprecedented in the world; no other public broadcaster had ever set out to provide niche programming for a series of special audiences, with a mandate to express and embody a specific cultural and social policy. In this way, SBS sits firmly within the tradition of public broadcasting as an institution of public service

⁵ Website at <http://www.saveoursbs.org/>

⁶ Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, *The Impact of Multicultural Television*, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, 1986.

and nation building. What is unique about SBS is that it was created specifically to express and promote a government *social* policy; that is, multiculturalism. It was an unabashed form of social engineering.

The Howard Government was notoriously hostile to multiculturalism, with Howard himself refusing to utter the term throughout the first half of his tenure as Australian Prime Minister. In his last year of power, Howard finally succeeded in abolishing the term entirely from the federal sphere, changing the name of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, with a renewed focus on ensuring new arrivals ‘integrated’ into the Australian ‘mainstream’.

Howard has always resented the progress of Australian society away from its colonial past to the inclusive and independent future that multiculturalism represents. As a direct result of the policy, Australian culture has been irreversibly changed, from a society in which Anglo-Irish culture dominated to a unique Australian character made up of the best parts of the many cultures that have contributed to the formation of our country: it is this that Howard and other cultural diversity recalcitrants cannot stand. He and his more regressive supporters deliberately undermined the concept of multiculturalism in Australia, often referencing irrelevant international debates, to the point at which they now believe it can be abolished with little resistance.

This is pertinent to the demise, fostered by a deliberate process of policy revisionism, of SBS Television as a multicultural broadcaster over the last decade. SBS Television has been the subject of government ambivalence since its earliest days; indeed, the Hawke Government announced in 1986 that it had decided to amalgamate SBS with the ABC. This decision was prompted by budgetary constraints, but was also informed by the ideology within certain sectors of the Labor Government that saw SBS as culturally divisive and favoured the recommendation of the 1985 report, *Serving multicultural*

Australia: the role of broadcasting, that SBS and the ABC should be merged within a single new national broadcaster.⁷

Following the announcement of the proposed amalgamation in the 1986 federal budget, the Hawke Government engaged in a process of debate and reappraisal of its decision, through the commissioning of the AIMA's report⁸ on the impact of multicultural television, and a Senate Standing Committee review.⁹ Opposition by ethnic community groups was led by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) and succeeded in bringing significant political pressure to bear on the government to reverse its decision and maintain SBS as an independent broadcaster in its own right. Ultimately, the Australian Democrats, who held the balance of power in the Senate, succeeded in overturning the amalgamation decision, having identified in its Standing Committee Review clear benefits in retaining SBS separately from the ABC.

The result of the revision and policy renewal prompted by the proposed amalgamation was a clarification of SBS's role as a multicultural broadcaster, and led to the development of policies to establish a wider audience amongst English-speaking Australians in the 1990s. These policies, like those that led to the creation of SBS, were developed deliberately and carefully, and drew upon significant academic research, community activism, political lobbying, and subsequent public policy.

Crucially, the strategic and programming policies developed within SBS during its first 15 years on air were designed in reference to the broader multicultural policies of Australian government. This close policy relationship between the network and the social policy it was created to support ensured the ongoing political support for, and public funding of, SBS, and guaranteed that the broadcaster's operations were clearly and substantially differentiated from Australia's first public broadcaster, the ABC, and from the commercial and community television sectors.

⁷ Committee of Review of the Special Broadcasting Service, *Serving multicultural Australia: the role of broadcasting*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985. pp. 173-207.

⁸ Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, op. cit.

⁹ Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, *The proposed amalgamation of the ABC and the SBS*, June 1987. Canberra : Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987

SBS's television and radio services had, from the outset, a clearly defined core audience of recent immigrants and longer-term residents from non-English speaking backgrounds, and a publicly declared goal of internationalising the largely Anglo-Australian middle class. As Jakubowicz acknowledged in 1994:

The rationale for government involvement was two-fold - radio programs were to provide information on settlement issues for immigrants, and allow for cultural maintenance. The television programs were designed to open to the whole Australian 'community' the culture of all nations that had contributed to the Australian population, and furthermore, to give monolingual Anglophones information and perspectives about the world which were denied to them in the mainstream media.¹⁰

During the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the recommendations of the 1987 AIMA report, programming policy at SBS Television was formulated to create a significant second audience among these 'monolingual Anglophones'. The 'cosmopolitanism project', as it was popularly known, sought to 'internationalise' previously resistant members of the largely Anglo-Australian middle-class.¹¹

By fostering an increasing demand for international and multicultural programming amongst a relatively small, but educated and influential, group of Australians, SBS Television greatly strengthened its position in the Australian media landscape and insulated itself, to some extent, against claims of irrelevance and extravagance—the argument that public funds could not reasonably be devoted to a broadcaster that was aimed only at a rapidly declining audience of non-English speaking people.

This appeal to the cosmopolitan audience was certainly a considered, and highly effective, policy response to the changing face of multicultural Australia. However, it represents the last significant policy development within SBS that was informed by SBS's chartered responsibilities. Furthermore, a series of failures by SBS's current management team—to understand the differentiation within its audience; to extend and

¹⁰ Jakubowicz et al, op. cit., p. 46

¹¹ See Robbins, Bruce, *Comparative cosmopolitanism*, in *Social Text*, Nos. 31/32, New York: 1992 and Hawkins, Gay, op. cit. for a discussion of the characteristics of cosmopolitan audiences.

develop the cosmopolitan project with an ongoing policy process that continues to respond to changing audience demographics and to serve the network's original purpose as a tool of multiculturalism; and, perhaps most crucially, to recognise and respond to the threats and opportunities presented by the advent of digital and online media—has had the unfortunate result that the legacy of the cosmopolitan project may be the destruction of the public value of SBS and the loss of its right to ongoing public funding as a separate entity from the ABC.

One of the major problems SBS now faces is that, in the face of the long-delayed advent of the digital media age in Australia, this cosmopolitan audience no longer has such a need for SBS. The upper-middle class, internationalised audience that SBS created in the 1990s has become the core market for pay television, where international news and current affairs, cutting edge documentary, world movies and risky, innovative Australian content, such as the award-winning *Love My Way*, are all available at a price that this high-income, cosmopolitan crowd find more than reasonable.

Pay TV has also presented SBS with serious competition in the market for international content—competition from which the public broadcaster was free for its first two decades.

The gradual migration of the cosmopolitan audience to pay television, the loss of support from its audience of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, and the declared shift in policy to pursue ratings through more popular programming, may create the perfect storm which finally sees SBS abolished, or absorbed into the ABC. Prominent Australian media and social commentators have recently questioned the ongoing public funding of a network which reaches only around five per cent of the population at any one time, and is chartered to promote a policy that the previous Australian government largely dismantled.

This, of course, played right into the Howard Government's hands. Indeed, the war of attrition against SBS's most loyal and dedicated production staff and on-air talent, and the

replacement of its culturally diverse board with supporters of the Howard Government's 'culture wars', such as Christopher Pearson, seemed designed to undermine SBS's original purpose and reduce its role in the cultural life of the nation to a point at which its abolition would be met with little more than resignation from its previously passionate supporters.

After 11 years of a socially conservative, economically neo-liberal Government that evinced a social conservatism that refused multiculturalism in favour of Western cultural hegemony, and a neo-liberal economic theory that refused public investment in favour of market forces, it's perhaps a wonder SBS remains in existence at all. But the board ensconced by Howard has virtually no public sector experience, and a tenuous connection with Australia's multicultural and non-English speaking communities, and the management that board has put in place lacks both an understanding of SBS's original role and purpose, and a commitment to the principles of public broadcasting that underpinned SBS's creation almost 30 years ago. This remains the central problem at SBS.

Programming policies now in place at SBS are no longer designed in reference to the multicultural policies it was created to serve. The latest SBS Annual Report and Corporate Plan make no reference to the term 'multiculturalism', although 'multicultural Australia' is mentioned several times. This reflects the previous government's preference to speak of multiculturalism as equivalent to cultural diversity in the quotidian sense, rather than as a deliberate government policy. The Corporate Plan includes details of advertising income, and the *Advertising and Sponsorship Guidelines* provide an explanation of the reinterpretation of 'natural breaks' in programming that have allowed the insertion of advertisements within programs.¹²

The 2006 Annual Report contains many references to the multicultural and multilingual programming still broadcast on SBS, with particular reference to the morning *World*

¹² Special Broadcasting, *Corporate Plan 2007-2012*, Appendix 4, pp. 17-18. Artarmon: Special Broadcasting Service, 2007.

Watch broadcast of international news programs from 11 non-English speaking countries, and an emphasis on the 50/50 ratio of English to LOTE programming.¹³ Even while openly pursuing non-specialised, English speaking audiences through the programming of such content as *Top Gear*, SBS management is still obliged to defend its multicultural credentials in order to justify its ongoing public funding as a 'special' broadcasting service.

The lack of consistency between government policy on multiculturalism and the SBS Charter has led to a situation in which SBS has been cut adrift from its social purpose. Policy at SBS is now subject to the vicissitudes of often mis-informed management influence without the necessary counterweight of a government committed to ensuring adherence to its original, chartered purpose of promoting multiculturalism.

In closing, it's important to note those things SBS does well, and for which Australia needs it to continue. SBS's Australian drama production goes a long way to filling the gap left by the decline in production at the ABC, as identified by Robert Manne in the December-January edition of *The Monthly*. Certainly, SBS dramas such as *Remote Area Nurse*, *The Circuit* and, most recently, *East West 101*, are outstanding television. *East West 101*, in particular, is the sort of contemporary Australian drama that not only matches the best international import for story-telling, suspense and fine acting, but accurately and thoughtfully reflects the reality of modern Australian life in a way that recent ABC programs, such as *Rain Shadow* (a highly competent and engaging drama, but one mired in the old, monocultural and now decidedly-minority experience of Australian life on the land) have failed to achieve.

But even this success comes with caveats: firstly, all the programs mentioned above were commissioned from the independent production sector by former head of SBS Independent (SBSi) Glenys Rowe, who left the job over a year ago. Her replacement, Ned Lander, also quit last month and is yet to be succeeded. Secondly, all these programs were outsourced and produced by independent producers funded in part by SBSi, as was

¹³ Special Broadcasting, *Annual Report 2006*. Artarmon: Special Broadcasting Service, 2007.

the Australian content of *Who Do You Think You Are?*. The ABC recently announced its intention to adopt this approach and will thus provide hitherto absent competition for SBS in securing the best independent Australian content. And thirdly, despite the high quality and obvious appeal of these programs, virtually no-one is watching them: *The Circuit* struggled to reach more than 200,000 viewers, and early ratings for *East West 101* are not much better, while Australian light entertainment programs on the ABC, such as *Spicks and Specks*, *The Chaser* and *Summer Heights High* regularly broke the million viewer mark this year. This strengthens the argument that such programs are better placed on one national public broadcaster, thus bringing the reality of multicultural Australia into the mainstream of our public sphere.

All this raises real and complex questions about the future of SBS. One thing is certain: the current practice, of policy developed in reaction to the culture wars and in absence of a coherent political policy supporting the network's charter to support and promote multiculturalism, cannot continue if SBS is to justify its ongoing public funding and existence as a part-commercially funded public broadcaster.

It's 20 years since the AIMA review of SBS's services, and of the impact of multicultural television and its ongoing role. It's time for another. In the face of digital broadcasting, the at-a-mouse-click availability of international news and television content over the internet, and the changing face of multicultural Australia, a review of SBS and of the representation of cultural diversity in Australian media is long overdue. New communications Minister Stephen Conroy should make this a priority of his portfolio's first term. Only after a comprehensive, non-partisan and government-funded review of its charter, policy and practice, and relationship to the ABC, can SBS move confidently into its fourth decade of operation.

A comprehensive government review is, in fact, SBS's only hope to avoid a continuation of the gradual dilution of its original purpose, and of the myriad internecine struggles that have undermined its previously unassailable position as Australia's home of high quality, culturally relevant television.

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