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A third Open Letter to:
Mr Mark Scott
Managing Director
ABC

27 January 2009

By fax: (02) 8333 5172 (one page), email: Scott.Mark@abc.net.au and post: GPO Box 9994,
Sydney, NSW 2001

Dear Mr Scott,

ENGAGING ABC CRITICS IN PUBLIC

I acknowledge your letter dated 22 January in response to my second Open Letter to you of 18 January. (You do not mention my longer first Open Letter of 7 December 2008.) I appreciate your generous opening remark about my background and service to the ABC.

I note your restriction that your letter is “not for further distribution or publication” and I shall adhere to this. In this letter I shall only refer to key aspects of the Radio National controversy that are missing from your letter and the letter of 19 December from the Director of Radio, Ms Sue Howard, who had been responsible for the program changes but left the ABC on that day.

First, as an ABC supporter it is disappointing that you have missed the overall purpose of my first two letters where I urged you and other ABC managers to “come out” and engage widely in public debate over the program closures. Long before today, the eve of the changes being implemented this week, it should have been imperative for managers to address specifically the various criticisms in the public media. I gave you 15 diverse references in my letter of 7 December and refrained from adding comments of my own on these items. The ABC’s credibility is at stake in being responsive to the listening public in general, to RN listeners in particular and to public officials. I am far from a lone voice of concern that this credibility should not be compromised by silence from the ABC while you are negotiating for major increases in the triennial budget (refer to the Senate resolution of 16 October and the published Questions on Notice in Senate Estimates last October and answers).

Secondly and like Ms Howard, you have failed to fill the public vacuum of *evidence* supporting the closures since they were revealed in October. Sure, program changes are necessary from time to time for various reasons but these should never be unexplained “changes for change’s sake”.

Thirdly, there is no indication in Ms Howard’s or your letters that ABC program managers had undertaken any demonstrable sounding of key national bodies with obvious stakes in continuity of the specialised programs. The history of the ABC’s relations with them should have been well-studied by the managers. They would then have realised that both Religion and Science (whether designated “Department” or “Unit”) were established with strong external supporters (Religion in the 1940s and Science’s first appointment in 1964) and they warranted respect. In balance, the specialist broadcasters had ensured professional independence from the representative bodies. Your lack of mention indicates there were no consultations. Unsurprisingly after the shock of the announcements, representative bodies have requested reversals but to no avail, while the outstanding, axed program-makers like Stephen Crittenden have earned no internal or public praise from management.

Yours sincerely,

(Founding Head of ABC Science Unit)