

*Dr Peter Pockley*  
*Science Writer & Broadcaster*

*25 Avenue Road*  
*Glebe*  
*NSW 2037*  
*Telephone: +61 (0) 2 9660 6363*  
*Fax: +61 (0) 2 9660 6239*  
*Email: scicomm@bigpond.net.au*

---

An Open Letter to:

Mr Mark Scott  
Managing Director  
ABC  
GPO Box 9994  
Sydney, NSW 2001  
Fax: (02) 8333 5482 (two pages)

7 December 2008

Dear Mr Scott,

### **REVERSING MAJOR CHANGES TO ABC RADIO NATIONAL**

As a key authority established for the public good, the ABC should be welcoming the copious evidence from a flood of direct submissions and a continuing stream of items in other public media that the Radio National network has a significant and diverse body prepared to declare their support for the network *as it is*. The ABC continues to encourage members of its audience to “Have Your Say!” but this call has a hollow ring for as long as there is no indication from “management” that the slightest notice has been taken of the calls for reversal of the clearly misguided decision to axe nine programs from the 2009 schedule.

**Welcoming Support:** It will be a national tragedy if these changes and the outright rejection of the flood of calls for reversal were to blacken your history as Editor-in-Chief of ABC programs. Failure to do so would compromise your pitch to government for providing substantial increases in triennial funding, following the ideology-driven attacks on the ABC from the former government, beginning with its punitive strike in its first (1996) Budget. The ABC is still suffering from this. You should be welcoming and harnessing, not rejecting, the enthusiastic support for RN’s specialist programs.

**Responding to the Issues:** I urge you to take a realistic second look at the “form letters” which have been sent over your name and those of middle “managers” to complainants. These letters (virtually identical between “authors” and hence the work of internal memo-writers) simply fail to address the deep issues raised by correspondents and in media coverage. All we have is an anodyne news release confirming the changes, citing not a shred of evidence that your managers had carefully surveyed the current audiences and contributors to the specialist programs being axed.

**Losing Great Programs and Presenters:** These programs have added lustre and variety to such a gem of a timeslot as 8.30 – 9.00 am weekdays. From any survey you could only conclude that a significant section of your erstwhile support would be outraged. As senior manager, you should be ashamed of the pathetic standards of middle managers in the manner of their abrupt announcement of the changes to the staff affected and to the public.

There has been not a word of appreciation, commendation or congratulations to the outgoing presenters and producers for the clearly outstanding jobs they have done for the ABC and their national audiences over the years. For example, it sticks out that none of the form letters or public statements makes any mention of Mr Stephen Crittenden, an original, thoughtful and exceptionally well-informed interviewer. If this failure has been on legal advice, then you should state as much.

**Significant Critics:** It is clear that you have been poorly let down by the entirely predictable reaction from audiences and representative bodies (e.g. the collective Catholic Bishops and the Anglican

Primate with regard to the axing of The Religion Report). If you did have any prior support for the changes (e.g. persistent complaints about program content) you should be declaring these openly, together with any remedial action you may have instituted with the staff members concerned.

While the axing of “The Religion Report” attracted much of the first burst of criticism, the equivalent fates of “The Media Report”, “The Sports Factor”, “In Conversation” and others have escalated the issues into broader issues of support for specialised units and programs.

**Critiques Demanding Answers:** I now draw your attention to some of the major analyses and critiques of the issues raised by your decisions over RN’s schedule for 2009. Each of these warranted a comprehensive response from the ABC, but the silence from your organisation is giving the impression that either you have nothing to say or you have decided to hunker down in hope that “it will all go away”.

- “Update” newsletter of Friends of the ABC (NSW), December 2008: “Aunty gets it wrong again – badly”, 18 pages of criticism from Friends and much of what has appeared in mainstream press.
- Paul Collins, former specialist editor, Religion, ABC: “God Help us!”; Crikey, 15 October.
- Andrew Dodd, Founding presenter of The Media Report: “The dumbing down of Radio National” [on The Media Report]; Crikey, 16 October.
- Senate questions ABC axing of Religion Report; Hansard, 16 October.
- Kelly Burke: “ABC radio cuts draw a religious sermon”; Sydney Morning Herald, 22 October.
- Peter Pockley, Founding Head of ABC Science Unit: “ABC needs vigorous discussions, not web offerings”; “First Word” letter, Sydney Morning Herald, 23 October.
- Jill Greenwell, “Radio National Under Threat”, Update (FABC NSW); December
- Robert Manne: “New Teeth for Aunty – Reinvigorating the National Broadcaster”; Talk to Friends of the ABC, The Monthly magazine, December 2007 – January 2008.
- Media Watch, ABC TV, 27 October.
- Christopher Pearson: “Pray for sense to prevail”, The Weekend Australian, 25 October.
- Stephen Matchett: “Radio National’s downshift hits the fans where it hurts”, The Australian, 22 October.
- Caroline Chambers: “The Internet Killed the Radio Star”, New Matilda, 2 October.
- John Carmody: “Rescue our ABC from postmodernist clutches”; The Australian, 19 November.
- Frank Campbell: “On the diminution of critical public culture”, Review, The Weekend Australian, 29-30 November.
- Errol Simper: “Mixed views on ABC’s program reshuffle”, Media, The Australian 1 December.

Every one of these contributions warrants a fully detailed response in public or the ABC will be seen as yet another “corporate” which has muffled its ears, blindfolded its eyes and closed its doors.

Yours sincerely,