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CATHOLICS IN COALITION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace
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**'What does the Budget *really* mean
for the ABC?'**

Edited Transcript of Address given by

Mal Hewitt on 15 June 2014

About Mal Hewitt



Mal Hewitt has been President of Friends of the ABC since 2007 and is the current editor of their magazine Quarterly Update.

In 2014 Mal was awarded an OAM for services to music education and to the community. He began as a music teacher at Merrylands High School in 1967 then became deputy principal at Riverstone High School before retiring in 2005. He was president and musical director of the Public Schools Concert Committee, established the General Picton String Band, was foundation president of the Collegiate of Special Music Educators, and since 1993 has been the musical director of The Occasional Performing Sinfonia which has raised about \$300,000 for charities. Mal has also been involved for many years in indigenous communities. From 1970 to 1995 in his Christmas school holidays he led work parties to Pitjantjatjara Country in northern South Australia, building 300 homes for the indigenous community.

Mal Hewitt's Address

One of the reasons I'm passionate about the ABC is my three boys - Reg is 8, Gordon's 5 and Jeremy's 3 - because I want them to have the same access to information, entertainment, news, Peppa Pig, that I had growing up in rural NSW. The ABC, as with all of you, was an inseparable part of our lives. We are in a somewhat strange media world where change has been so rapid particularly over the last 10 years. I'm going to talk quite a bit about money because that, essentially, is the problem facing the ABC at the moment.

The ABC was set up back in the 1930s to inform, educate and entertain the Australian population, and it did that very successfully over most of its life, with

a reach into areas in Australia that were outside of the capacity of any commercial network.

A few years ago I was in Mt Isa at a weekend workshop with young kids involved in music out there. I was doing an interview with the ABC office and I came out, I happened to meet Bob Katter – lovely Bob, a very entertaining bloke. We got chatting and Bob said to me, ‘Still the ABC is essential to the bush. We cannot live without the ABC, without the information that the ABC provides.’ Bob is a maverick but of course a great supporter of the ABC.

The ABC is a free to air broadcaster. It costs nothing to access any of the services offered by the ABC. This is a very rare occurrence around the world in the media today. New Zealand no longer has a free to air government-funded broadcaster; neither does Canada; neither does South Africa. The BBC has been under enormous pressure – pressure from, guess who, Rupert Murdoch.

The reality facing the ABC today is that there is a growing number of politicians who believe that there is no place for a publicly funded broadcaster, that it should not exist. You will hear people like Cory Bernardi say that there is no place in the world these days for a government-funded broadcaster.

There’s a growing feeling amongst conservative politicians. Why would you pay \$100,000 to run an ad on television when you can run it for virtually nothing on the internet and possibly reach a greater audience. It’s even more difficult for newspapers. The experts will say that within 10 years we probably won’t buy a printed copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It will be available online, of course, but they will no longer print it. This is the world of change facing the media.

I want to bring you to a couple of realities. In 1987 the budget for the ABC was \$967 million. The budget for the ABC in 2014 was \$1.1 billion and it has only gone up to that figure as a result of two budgets under the Labor Government, to cover some very specific areas like more Australian drama, like a dedicated kids’ TV channel.

If you consider what’s happened to our buying power between 1987 and 2014, it’s probably safe to say that the ABC operates now on about half the money



that they had in 1987. So those who say the ABC is wallowing in cash are completely wrong because the ABC is now operating a vastly greater number of broadcasting platforms than it was in 1987.

Over that period of time the ABC has suffered enormous criticism from both sides of politics. Remember when Bob Hawke took us into the Gulf War? Bob Hawke was incensed that the ABC provided coverage of the Gulf War other than what was coming to us from CNN. The ABC had the temerity to talk to Middle East experts and journalists. Bob Hawke never forgave the ABC for that. Tony Abbott quite recently used the term ‘the ABC should be a cheer squad for Australia’. The danger in all of that is that ‘for Australia’ means the Australian government. It is the role of the ABC as it is for every other independent media organisation to shine a light into dark places that governments don’t want us to go to.

I am entertained weekly by Mike Carlton, who worked in the ABC on his beginnings in journalism - as did many of the other people who now work in commercial television, they were trained by the ABC. The commercials don’t train anybody; they have no budget, no capacity to train people.

I’m going to quote Mike as he writes about our Prime Minister’s recent visit to worship at the feet of Emperor Murdoch in New York – or was it Canada?

“I enjoy thinking of Murdoch in New York as King Kong, the 1933 version: ... Here at home, News Corps is going through a particularly shouty phase at the moment, snarling at foes and competitors real and imagined. This aggro is not uncommon, of course. But it has scaled new heights of paranoia in the past few weeks, with multiple daily assaults on the ABC and Fairfax – publisher of the *Herald* – and a new target, the Australian online version of London's *Daily Mail*, which has been accused of plagiarism by none other than the editor of *The Daily Telegraph* (insert hollow laugh here).”

“The snarliest of the lot is *The Australian*, which is campaigning – endlessly – for the sacking of the ABC managing director, Mark Scott. As everyone knows, Rupert detests public broadcasting on principle: audiences should not get stuff for free when they could be paying him for



it. Scott therefore presides over a nest of inner-city, latte-sipping, chardonnay-guzzling, Green-Left layabouts. His most recent mortal sin was his failure to apologise promptly and expansively for the *Chaser's* wicked depiction of the Oz columnist Chris Kenny humping a dog.”

“Eventually he was bullied into delivering. It was a useful guide to the view of free speech from the News Corps skyscraper in Holt Street, Surry Hills. You can say anything you like as long as you don't offend one of King Kong's culture warriors.”

Here's the enormous incongruity in this country. Andrew Bolt can say what he likes, and of course the outrage of the conservative side of politics, when Andrew Bolt was actually called to task and punished for publishing what was clearly untrue about many Aboriginal people in Australia – you know the story, Bolt wrote the article saying all these pretend Aboriginals aren't really Aboriginal at all and they're getting all this money. Of course, what he wrote was poorly researched and blatantly untrue. He was convicted under Section 18C and George Brandis is doing his best to remove 18C so that the Andrew Bolts can have the right to offend and have the right to be bigots.

It's fine for Alan to lambast Julia Gillard day after day after day on his radio program and call her a liar. I wonder if Alan has ever called Tony Abbott a liar for every single election promise that he broke. Where is the media balance there?

'The ABC is the balance.' In a moment I'm going to tell you what the ABC covers with \$1.1 billion.

Channel 10, which is the one television network with the lowest budget of all of Channels 7, 9 and 10, has more money than the ABC, just for one television network. That's pretty staggering, isn't it, when you consider what the ABC does with its \$1.1 billion which has just, of course, been reduced.

The Australia Network is a television production company run by the ABC until it was abolished by the Abbott Government. The Australia Network was funded with \$140 million out of the budget of the Dept of Foreign Affairs. The Australia



Network broadcast Australian TV, news, current affairs and certain selected Australian programs into Asia and the Pacific from a transmitter in Darwin.

Several years ago, when Kevin Rudd was Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Australia Network was put out to tender and Fox, one of Murdoch's organisations, actually made a successful tender and there was a great deal of consternation within the Labor Government so the tender was overturned. Julia Gillard was very concerned about this, as were most of the rest of the Labor Government, and so they actually scrapped the tender process and said, we want to stay with the ABC and so they handed it back to the ABC. It could be argued that it should never have been put out to tender in the first place. Certainly you could say, in revenge, the Abbott Government, as soon as they came in, took the Australia Network away from the ABC and removed that funding.

Only a few months before that the Australia Network was given the right by the Chinese government to broadcast television into China the Australian government has also tossed out this long fought for and hard won access into China via television.

Do not confuse the Australia Network with Radio Australia, which is obviously radio broadcasting. Now Radio Australia can broadcast radio into China and has done for a long time. Radio Australia is part of this budget but what Mark Scott and ABC management did, when the Australia Network was continuing with the ABC, was use the budget and in effect combine both broadcasters by using the same journalists, same material, same correspondents, same studios, as the ABC has the capacity to do with its flexibility. So in effect, Radio Australia and Australia Network were sharing in that \$140 million that came from DFAT and that's why Radio Australia is now in trouble, because the money has been removed: how do they get the money back?

Over the last 25 years the ABC has significantly expanded the services it provides to the Australian community and done so with fewer staff and less money. In 1987 the funding available was \$967 million with a full-time equivalent staff level of 6,400. By 2012 the ABC's inflation-adjusted funding was \$1.1 billion with the full time equivalent staff of 4,600. However, the expansion of the broadcasting services offered to the public over this period

was dramatic. At the beginning of 1987, there was one analogue television channel. 25 years later, ABC 1 is both analogue and digital; three additional digital channels, ABC2, ABC3 and ABC News 24; an additional general channel; a specialist children's channel; and a 24 hour news channel.

In 1987 there were 38 local radio stations and two national services, Radio National and Classic FM. Triple J was accessible only in Sydney. By 2012 there were 60 local radio stations, so the ABC increased from 38 to 60 local stations all in rural and regional areas. Radio National, ABC Classic FM and Triple Jay were available nationwide as was the news service, ABC News Radio. Furthermore, all four national stations were available on digital radio in the five mainland capitals plus five digital-only services including a specialist jazz station, a specialist country music station, Triple J, the broadcasting of disks of amateur garage bands, which is where our record companies look exclusively for new talent.

Those are just traditional broadcasting. In radio service delivery, podcasting has become widely available. I'll give you one example: Philip Adams. There are more people accessing Philip Adams in America than in Australia through podcasting because Philip Adams has American experts on his show who can't get a hearing in America.

In 1995 the ABC began offering services on the worldwide web. Today there are hundreds of websites providing text, audio and visual services, both nationwide and for local regional radio services. ABC radio and television services have extended their capacity for interaction with their audiences via the use of social media. Earlier this year, Triple J passed the landmark figure of 500,000 Facebook friends, an extraordinary number in a market the size of Australia.

The new services were largely funded by internal efficiencies as well as reallocation of resources. No additional funding was provided for the content costs of ABC2, the delivery costs of online services, the content of digital radio nor the creation of ABC News 24.

Has anyone seen Juanita delivering the seven o'clock news? In 1987, 14 people were needed. Today only 4 or even 2 people can do it. Every major



capital used to have broadcast studio facilities where programs could be produced. All those wonderful gardening programs with Peter Cundall were produced in the Hobart studios. All of those facilities around Australia have disappeared. Even Melbourne has very limited capacity now and undoubtedly, within a very short time, Sydney will be the only place where the ABC can produce television programs.

We decry that each time it happens, but if you haven't got the money, you can't do it. So ABC has to do more and more with less and less. When the ABC expanded its television channels that was another reason why Murdoch was incensed. The kids' channel that the ABC got, Murdoch wanted, and he wasn't given it – thank goodness. *Play School* – what a magical world created for kids. It's quality television for children and where else can you get it in Australia other than on the ABC?

They also put in at that time Donald McDonald. Donald was put in to clean up the ABC and Donald found it to be a lean, efficient organisation – he became one of the ABC's greatest advocates. It's the same with Mark Scott. He's doing a wonderful job.

The great Chris Masters, investigative journalist, produced many extremely important programs back in the 1980s and 90s. One of these, the 'Moonlight State', brought down a premier and police commissioners in a state that was utterly corrupt. Chris Masters was sent to Queensland by *Four Corners* and was given unlimited time, unlimited budget. He was told, you've got a long as it takes to get the story. He had three research assistants. That could not happen today. Chris Masters will tell you, given the same assignment today, he said he'd be told, you've got two weeks to do the job, no research assistants, off you go, do what you can.

The question we must ask ourselves is: Do we want to live in a democracy where government can hide what it doesn't want us to know?

Look at the situation with Murdoch in the UK where you have the ultimate in corruption of police and politicians, for similar reasons, so that Murdoch's media organisation could achieve greater and greater influence.



Do we want that situation here in Australia? It's interesting that the Left-leaning independent sources of information are increasingly through internet organisations.

There is increasing pressure on the ABC more and more, and the worst is still to come because we have not yet seen the outcomes of the Lewis report into the ABC under the so-called 'efficiency dividend'. Malcolm Turnbull, Minister responsible for the ABC, has made it clear that there is much worse to come for the ABC.

Q: You're also talking about SBS ...

Yes, and that has been a proposal on the books for quite a long time, to merge ABC and SBS to represent savings. I guess we've seen these sorts of mergers in the past and it's a bit of a fallacy to think that it's automatically going to save lots of money. That merger would be opposed strongly by both organisations simply because the SBS was set up to serve a totally different purpose from the ABC's, and it does. Of course, the SBS has had the partial privatisation of the introduction of advertising.

Many conservative politicians will tell you should happen to the ABC, but many commercial stations do not want this to happen. The commercials will admit, not publicly but in private, that the ABC has handled the digital revolution in a far superior manner to any other media organisation in Australia.

So the ABC has been extremely successful in adapting to a new media world. The commercials hate it; Murdoch hates it because we still have a free-to-air station that costs us 8 cents a day.

But ask yourself the question: For the commercial media, who pays for it and how is it paid for? The answer is: We pay for it. We pay for it in every product that we buy that has an additional load put on the cost of that product so they can advertise the product.... it costs you far more than 8 cents a day to support the commercial media in what you are paying in every product that you buy.



Q: Don't you think we're probably just as well off putting pressure on the Labor side of politics, otherwise the Labor Government tends to just to let go...

They do tend to just carry on business as usual from that point. Friends of the ABC is a lobby group. A few weeks ago Friends of the ABC met with Malcolm Turnbull and is in constant dialogue with Labor and the Greens. You're absolutely right that we have to apply pressure on Labor equally, so that if, as we can only hope, this will be a one-term government, when things do change Labor reintroduces and brings us back to a saner world.

Q: What can we do? What's the most effective thing people like us can do at the moment?

Number one – make sure that everybody you know knows the truth.

I'll give you a classic example of the commercials – way back in the 80s and 90s, BHP was involved in Papua New Guinea, the Ok Tedi Mine was destroyed, community after community down the Fly River. That was only ever publicised on the ABC. You know why the commercials wouldn't? Because BHP, of course, is one of the biggest providers of advertising through its various organisations. That's the danger of a commercial world. You will not get the truth. *Media Watch* frequently exposes so-called news items on commercial television that are really advertorials.

The Murdoch line is that the ABC is preoccupied with two issues: Climate Change and asylum seekers. The Murdoch press will tell us that Climate Change is not a vital world issues. Yet anyone with any prescience into the future, including 95% of the scientists around the world, will tell you that there is no more important issue that the world faces than Climate Change. Abbott says, oh, we've got to look after the economy. There will be no economy if we don't do something about Climate Change.

On the issue of asylum seekers, the politicians have this belief that Western Sydney is full of asylum seekers and so we have to appease the voters of Western Sydney by being as tough as we possibly can on asylum seekers. Australia is an international pariah because of its treatment of asylum seekers, and the ABC recognises that. The rest of Australia should realise that – that

while we continue to have governments that torture these people by locking them up in these hellholes, then Australia will slip further and further. It's done enormous damage to us in our immediate neighbourhood of Indonesia, Malaysia, South East Asia, and you look at virtually any country in the world that's coping with massively greater numbers of asylum seekers than we are.

These are the sorts of issues that the ABC gets lambasted for by the commercial interests. All of these are reasons why we must fight as much as we can, so the truth is really important, that we use every opportunity that we can as individuals, our friends, our families, our communities, our interconnected groups of people, that we take every opportunity to say, hey, do you know, have you seen, you should know this. That's the first step.

We need to galvanise as much as possible, and we do this through Friends of the ABC. Friends of the ABC has 15 branches spread throughout NSW, many of those with local Federal members who are on the conservative side of politics. We say to them, you let your Member know through every possible way, through letters, through individual meetings and so on, how important, that you value the ABC and that you do not want it to be diminished in any way. That has to be on both sides of politics. We have to use every avenue we can to make sure our decision-makers know what the people think.

At a recent public meeting at Port Macquarie called by the local branch of Friends, 250 people turned up. Locals were outraged that the ABC should be attacked like this. So there's a great groundswell of support out there for the ABC that we have to galvanise in every way we can.

Q: You mentioned GetUp [GetUp ran a campaign recently that got 250,000 signatures over a relatively short time]. While the government says publicly that they're not worried about that, I would imagine that in fact they're very concerned but they're not going to say that publicly.

No. After the first budget success when Lindsay Tanner was still Finance Minister, I asked my local Member Julie Owen, Why do you think when nobody else got any money why did the ABC get money? She said, Lindsay Tanner had meetings with local MPs and at almost every one of those meetings, the local Members mentioned the ABC and how important it was that it be funded.

That's why the ABC got money when nobody else did. Liberals have the same sort of network of local concerns and local information, so it is important to keep hammering away with local members that this is going to affect the way I vote at the next election.

Q: I'm wondering about the Australia Network - if funding has been withdrawn from the ABC, is some other group going to pick it up? I'm also wondering, I appreciate the idea that the ABC and SBS need to be two separate bodies but are there opportunities for cooperation, efficiencies, say for their international coverage?

Not now. The Australia Network has to be considered entirely separately as something that was funded under Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I wouldn't be surprised if the Abbott Government at some point retenders for Australia Network to provide Rupert Murdoch with the opportunity to get back in. As far as the sharing of resources, the government can say to ABC and SBS, you've got no choice, you have to merge, and the ABC and SBS will get on with it and do it as best they can.

There are strong supporters of the ABC within the present government, particularly in the National Party. They represent remote rural electorates where the ABC is all they've got. They are strong supporters of maintaining the ABC's government funding and keeping the ABC free of commercial influence. You might have noticed the recent publicity about *Bananas in Pyjamas* in Canberra and a gathering of Friends of the ABC among parliamentarians, where Malcolm Turnbull got into trouble for from Andrew Bolt for attending. That was multi-party: there were Greens, there were Labor and Liberal people involved in that. So there is that support.

Q: How many members does the Friends of the ABC have nationally?

Nationally, about 5,000.

Q: Has the Friends of the ABC considered moving in other areas other than as a lobby group?

I said they were a lobby group but they're more than that. Lobbying is the reason for which they were established but our local group in the Blue

Mountains where I now live is a very active branch. Anything that happens locally, the Springwood Festival, the Winter Festival up at Katoomba next weekend, Friends of the ABC will be there handing out stuff about the ABC saying this is important. So local advocacy is really important.

Q: Perhaps that's one of the invitations to us to go on to the website and join the membership, if you're not already so.

You can join and pay membership on the website (www.abcfriends.org.au). We run things like a dinner for Friends of the ABC in September. Our AGM is also in September in the city,

CCJP thanks Mal Hewitt for a very thought provoking presentation and discussion.

Please see our website www.ccjpoz.org for other Sunday Seminar summaries and reports.

