

NSW/ACT Bulletin

‘TAKE YOUR PASSION AND MAKE IT HAPPEN’

This quote from the 1983 film *Flashdance* encapsulates the challenge for the ABC and its Friends.

That challenge is to ensure that the ABC thrives as a beacon for our democracy. While passion is essential, political action is crucial. The first aim of the NSW/ACT Bulletin is to broaden interactions and information exchanges between our Branches. The positive outcome must be to enhance the political clout of the NSW/ACT ABC Friends.

The Committee has developed a new Strategic Plan for 2024-6. Now, with a Federal Election looming sometime over the next nine months, it is critical to build the momentum and use every

opportunity to press the case for an independent and well-resourced ABC.

Much of the onus for leading this push rests with the recent appointment of Kim Williams as Chair. Already, he has been proactive in proselytising new goals and priorities for both ABC Radio and Television. Specifically, following the impending departure of Managing Director, David Anderson, Williams and his Board will dominate the pathways for the organisation.

Clearly, Williams is responding to growing discontent that the ABC consistently is heading downmarket, a view expressed by Peter Van Onselen from *The Australian* and former ABC broadcaster, John Faine.

Overall, the issue is money – more

money – a seemingly insuperable obstacle given current demands on the Federal Budget and the state of the media industry generally. It will be a tough fight to save an important pillar of democracy, namely a public broadcaster. The challenge for Kim Williams is ‘TO TAKE HIS PASSION AND MAKE IT HAPPEN’.

This edition of the NSW/ACT Friends of the ABC Bulletin includes your President’s report and profiles from various Branches and their activities. We hope all Branches will contribute on a regular basis.

If you have any queries, please contact your editing team: Rory Sutton (rcesutton@gmail.com) or Sue Zeckendorf (sue_zeck@hotmail.com).

Message from the President



Welcome to the first edition of our new newsletter, the *NSW & ACT Bulletin*. We are very fortunate that Rory Sutton, ABC Alumnus and ABC Friend agreed to assume editorial responsibility for this newsletter, assisted by Sue Zeckendorf, Associate Editor.

I would also like to take this opportunity to once again offer my sincere thanks to Mal Hewitt, OAM, editor of *Update* for a remarkable 17 years, supported by Dr Diana Wyndham, Assistant Editor, and enthusiastic editorial and production team.

Results from our 2024 member and supporter survey revealed a preference for digital communications as well as information on branch activities and events, findings that were incorporated into the design of the *NSW & ACT Bulletin*. We were also mindful that this new digital/print newsletter must be aligned with the 2023 ABCF National Communication Strategy and compatible with the monthly National digital/print newsletters and an annual publication (1st edition is in the final stages of production). Hopefully we have navigated a successful compromise!

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Our ABC remains under significant political, commercial and financial pressure. It must facilitate a transition to an integrated digital operation and satisfy the communication preferences of loyal ABC audiences without compromising broadcasting quality. There are many competing tensions in these national responsibilities that are difficult to reconcile. Advocating for an increase in ABC investment and highlighting the vital role the ABC plays as a free-to-air public broadcaster, public asset and pillar of our democracy, will be key messages in our federal election campaign and addressed in the Friends of the ABC (NSW & ACT) Strategic Plan 2024-2026 released earlier this month.

I know we are all disappointed that the political and financial vulnerability of the ABC in 2024-2025 is only marginally better than it was in 2022. Friends frequently contact me to express concerns about programming and journalistic quality, the lack of Australian stories and content, falling audience numbers, disappointing ratings and constant unsubstantiated, politically-motivated attacks by hostile anti-ABC commentators.

However, this is not the time to give up on Aunty! As Friends of the ABC we should make it clear to supporters that the current challenges are direct consequences of decreased government investment in an era when content, transmission, production and digital transformation costs are rising rapidly.

We could also remind people struggling with the rising cost of living that the ABC is a free-to-air TV, radio and streaming video-on-demand service provider (SVOD) in an environment dominated by user-pay streaming services provided by multinational corporations owned by billionaires. If we are able to successfully advocate for an increase in ABC investment and stronger protections from political interference, our ABC will be able to continue to deliver an extraordinary broadcasting and free SVOD experience (iView for example) for 21st Century Australians.

Dr Tess Howes

President, ABC Friends NSW & ACT



Spotlight Angela Catterns

ABC North Coast (2NR) is our local station broadcasting to the Northern Rivers Region of NSW, covering towns and cities including Lismore, Grafton, Ballina, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Casino, Murwillumbah and Tweed Heads.

One of the jewels in the crown of 2NR is the highly esteemed Angela Catterns, who presents the popular Saturday Morning Breakfast Show. Angela's smooth, professional and highly entertaining presentation reflects her depth of knowledge and understandings gained over an amazingly varied and extraordinarily successful career in media.

After working in Regional Radio and TV as an advertising copywriter, Angela became a reporter on a new children's TV show, Simon Townsend's Wonder World. Angela's journey with the ABC began in the mid '80s as a producer with Sydney Youth Radio Station Triple J. Her on-air career was launched when she filled in for a colleague with a broken ankle, leading to Angela presenting the Weekend Breakfast Show and later the Drive Show.

Headhunted by a high-profile commercial station, Angela lasted 18 months before being told: "Women don't like listening to women on radio and we think you're too intelligent for our audience". Angela became a researcher for SBS, then presented on Radio WKYS in Washington DC, before returning to Australia where she became morning presenter on the now 'national' Triple J. A trip to Lismore to crown the newly 'unearthed' band Grinspoon led to a permanent move back to the country and a shift to 'the ABC for grown ups', with Angela hosting an acclaimed national evening program from the Lismore studios.

Angela was enticed back to Sydney around 2000 with the challenge of taking on the Breakfast Show at 702 where she took the number one rating off Alan Jones in 2003! The Summer Breakfast Show at 702 with Wendy Harmer, along with trailblazing podcasts, were more milestones in Angela Catterns' phenomenal career.

Angela Catterns once reflected "the secret is to imagine you are talking to your best friend in the next room". Angela has many best friends listening in on 2NR on Saturday mornings.

Terry Timms

Committee Member ABC Friends Northern Rivers

ABC Friends NSW/ACT Strategic Plan:

Another piece of ‘corporate speak’
or a document that can unite our
efforts to advocate for the ABC?



Strategic Plans can sometimes seem best shelved in the bottom drawer. However, in the case of ABC Friends, with a network of a dozen branches covering a huge swathe of NSW/ACT, it is essential to have an agreed action plan. Our Strategic Plan 2024-6 now charts the way forward.

After analysing your feedback in the 2023 survey, the committee sat down for a full-day workshop to determine where best to put our energies. The process generated some bright ideas and turned them into this shared course of action.

We hope the Strategic Plan can be a useful working document for members. The document contains a history of the dire environment that we are confronting, which gives us

back-up to challenge Government to address drastically reduced budgets.

The period of the Plan covers the 2025 Federal election. Therefore, our number-one priority is developing campaign momentum to reinstate over 1,000 job losses (2014-22) and rebuild expertise. We will work actively with politicians and create events that will show them the strength of public opinion. We will find partners to magnify the message, such as in our forthcoming webinar on truth in political advertising, where we will engage academics, politicians and like-minded organisations.

Too often when we are fighting difficult battles, we forget the important job of keeping our own organisation strong. We are here for the long haul and our

Strategic Plan reflects the need to build and strengthen Friends. We will develop membership and support our far-flung branches with financial and administrative help. Younger people need to become engaged with ABC Friends, as do culturally diverse communities. We still have areas of the State that do not have branches!

This Strategic Plan comes at a time when democratic processes seem threatened and most of us feel acutely the need for strong public broadcasting. We will work with ABC Friends in each state, ABC Alumni, Parliamentary Friends and our national body to strengthen the ABC role in speaking truth to power.

Dr Susan Tregeagle
Canberra Committee

Extracts from the Strategic Plan

The ABC Friends NSW/ACT Strategic Plan 2024-26 outlines the planned direction forward for the NSW/ACT Friends, so that it can best support and advocate for the ABC. You can see the full Plan at www.abcfriends.net.au/nswact_strategic_plan_2024. This article summarises some of the highlights.

The Strategic Plan focusses on five core objectives:

- 1. SP01 – Increase campaign momentum**
- 2. SP02 – Increase membership numbers and diversity**
- 3. SP03 – Develop a social media communication strategy**
- 4. SP04 – Support and connect our branch network**
- 5. SP05 – Increase our political engagement strategy**

Some of the critical issues outlined in the Plan include:

- Call for the reinstatement of adequate Commonwealth Government funding to ensure stability and sustainability into the future. This is essential for the ABC to maintain broadcasting quality and comply with the ABC Charter.
- Ensure the ABC Board and ABC Executive adhere to top-tier governance and leadership standards.
- Use the ABC Friends’ powerful, collective voice to defend the ABC from political interference.

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Extracts from the Strategic Plan

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- Defend the ABC and individual ABC staff from unfair criticism by members of the hostile press.

Strategic Plan SP01, about increasing campaign momentum, includes the following:

Since 2013 successive coalition governments cut the ABC's funding by more than \$526 million resulting in more than 640 job losses and the termination of state-based current affairs. Significant reductions have also been made in original drama, science, arts, sports coverage, the closure of international bureaus and outsourcing of specialist program-making reducing profit from overseas sales and loss of copyright e.g. Bluey.

Strategic Plan SP05, discussing how to increase our political engagement strategy, includes the following:

Increase our political engagement strategy to broaden our political and executive support base and secure connections to people with power. At the heart of our 2024-2026 activism are two key messages:

1. The importance of the ABC as national public broadcaster as a foundation of our democracy and
2. The need for a significant increase in financial investment in the ABC.

"The ABC is an investment in Australia's future because a revitalised ABC will be a source of great national strength."

(Kim Williams, 2024)

To leverage our impact, we will coordinate events with like-minded organisations and content experts, e.g. ABC Alumni, to collectively and rigorously positioning the ABC as the most trusted public media organisation in Australia.

We will continue also to position the ABC as a key contributor to the *Strengthening Australian Democracy* initiative, launched by the Minister for Home Affairs in 2024 and *National Cultural Policy: Revive* launched by the Minister for the Arts in 2023.

Future editions of the Bulletin will include updates and articles commenting on and monitoring progress with the Strategic Plan.

Rory Sutton

Editor NSW/ACT Bulletin

Forthcoming NSW/ACT State Events



Webinar: Truth in Political Advertising

NSW/ACT Friends has put together an expert panel to bring you up to date with an issue central to trust in both the media and our political system, which has direct implications for our democracy. Chaired by ABC Alumna Anne Maria Nicholson, three expert commentators (Zali Steggall, Ullrich Ecker and Geoffrey Watson) will discuss what Australia needs to enhance democracy and why we need it now.

Attend online via Zoom.

Tuesday 15 October 6:00-7:00pm

Registration at www.abcfriends.net.au/truth_webinar2024.

ABC Friends (NSW/ACT) Annual General Meeting

Saturday 16 November 2:00pm

Sydney Mechanical School of Arts

Level 1, Henry Carmichael Theatre
280 Pitt Street Sydney

Guest speaker is **Helen Grasswill**, a Walkley, Logies and Human Rights award-winning journalist. She is a co-founder and former Deputy Chair of ABC Alumni.

All welcome.

If you would like to attend, RSVP to:
www.abcfriends.net.au/nswact_agm_2024

Interview with Tess Howes



NSW & ACT President, Tess Howes, always has been a devotee of the ABC and the crucial role the organisation plays in Australia's democracy. As a child, her parents limited how much television she could watch, her favourite program being the Addams Family. As with her own children, she grew up on a diet of ABC radio and television and is grateful that the ABC continues to keep everyone informed about local, national, and international news. In particular, she values the analyses provided by quality ABC journalists that keep her thinking about what is occurring around the world.

Currently, Tess is focusing on strategies that Friends of the ABC should undertake prior to the next Federal Election. Her background in community service and leadership roles confirms she is well-qualified for the task ahead. Tess has a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Sydney University and currently teaches in the Master of Business Administration program at Macquarie University.

Her decision to take a prominent role in Friends of the ABC was made at a coffee catch-up at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) with now former President

NSW & ACT, Ed Davis. Both share similar views about the critical importance of the ABC as a foundation of our democracy and both are appalled at the recent negative coverage of the ABC by the Murdoch press. Tess says the hostile, unfair and untrue commentaries are all the inspiration she needed to become involved. It is why she sought to stand as NSW & ACT President after Cassandra Parkinson was elected National President.

As the incumbent NSW & ACT President, Tess Howes recognises how essential it is for her to tackle contentious issues on behalf of the membership and take a stand on matters of national importance. She is in agreement with ABC Chairman, Kim Williams, that the Murdoch press commentary is 'unhinged', and the inherent negativity warrants minimal reaction or at best is ignored totally. We need to strengthen our own voice in support of the ABC. However, for now, the priority is the preparation and conduct of the organisation's Federal Election campaign strategy for 2025. The latest Committee meeting has reviewed the Strategic Plan, as outlined elsewhere in this Bulletin.

Tess sees that now is an exciting time and opportunity to lead the Friends of the ABC NSW & ACT and work with the National Committee to help protect our ABC for future generations of Australians. The latter is a cause close to her heart as the mother to five fabulous adult children and 'Mimi' to 12 special grandchildren.

Origin of Friends of the ABC

The idea of forming an active Friends of the ABC was first discussed one afternoon in a living room in Turramurra, in 1976. The Fraser Government had recently announced its intention of reducing ABC funding, causing great alarm among ABC listeners. This threat wasn't new, but many people felt it was serious enough this time for the public to organise ways of protecting the independence and ongoing funding of the national broadcaster. There were four of us on that particular afternoon: Walter Bass, a long-standing Bass family friend Hans Bandler and his wife Faith, and myself.

The result of that discussion was the decision to organise a public meeting, to be held a few weeks later

in Sydney's Anzac House. It was attended by enthusiastic supporters who filled the hall. Eventually a committee was formed, a president was chosen and plans were made for an ongoing newsletter. From this beginning there are today over 40 branches of the ABC Friends around Australia.

Now, nearly 50 years later, when the Sydney Northern Suburbs branch Chair introduces the meetings with an acknowledgement of the country on which we meet - Darramurragal, Gemmeragal and Darug – I often think back to the very beginning of the Friends, and how and why it began.

The "why" was obvious. In order to fulfill its Charter obligations – briefly, to entertain, educate, maintain its independence, and reflect the unique cultural diversity of Australia – the ABC must have adequate funding.

The "how" began as most such groups do: with committee meetings (volatile at times), plans, counterplans, proposals, and disagreements. But once it was established and the

need more widely understood, the Friends' efforts to protect the ABC were at times massive, often tunnel-visioned, and always based on deep commitment.

In a world being torn apart by wars, intolerance and the unbridled power of the media, perhaps it's no coincidence that the ABC Friends came into being because the lives of three people in that first little group had been profoundly affected by the results of war, fear of cultural diversity, racial inequality and intolerance of migrants. Walter Bass (1931-2015) and Hans Bandler (1914-2009) had come to Australia in 1939 to escape the Nazi regime. Faith Bandler (1918-2015) was a highly influential leader in the fight for Indigenous Rights. All three had known racial discrimination and were passionate about the need to protect and support the ABC: the voice for all Australians, standing for freedom, independence and democracy.

Corin Fairburn Bass

ABC Friends Co-Founder and Northern Suburbs of Sydney Branch Committee Member



Branch profile Northern Rivers

The Northern Rivers Branch is made up of ABC Friends members living in the Far North Coast of NSW.

The ABC has a local presence via ABC North Coast, with studios located in the regional city of Lismore.

The Branch engages with our local MPs at the federal level in Richmond (Labor) and Page (Nationals). The state electorates are Tweed (Nationals), Ballina (Greens), Lismore (Labor) and Clarence (Nationals).

The Branch was formed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to mobilise support and to campaign against the severe funding cuts imposed on the ABC budget by the then Howard government. Some members of the founding group are still active on the Branch committee.

The Branch committee meets every second month to discuss a range of issues affecting the ABC locally and nationally. The provision of a local voice, news, entertainment support for community causes and activities in a diverse rural area is of paramount importance. Especially important locally is the essential role that the ABC plays at times of natural disaster such as the devastating floods that affected so many people in our region.

Activities undertaken by the Branch in recent years have included a photography competition in 2021 to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the ABC. The competition was well-supported, attracting entries from across Australia.

The Northern Rivers Branch continues to be active, with thoughtful consideration of how best to support the ABC and



Kerry O'Brien addressing Northern Rivers Branch and TAFE members in 2023

keep our members engaged in the ongoing need to preserve and promote an independent, publicly-owned national broadcaster.

Tim Mulroy

President ABC Friends Northern Rivers

Branch profile Central Coast

The Central Coast branch of ABC Friends NSW is a long-standing one which has managed to attract some prominent current and former ABC presenters as guest speakers. Past guests to our branch have included Andrew Denton, Eric Campbell, Kerry O'Brien, Geraldine Doogue, Emma Alberici and Chris Masters. The fact that we have managed to host ABC journalists of this calibre is a tribute to former Central Coast branch Convenors, John Hale and Klaas Woldring, and their dedicated committees.

Although our branch covers three Federal electorates (Robertson, Dobell and the southern end of Shortland), most of our campaigning has centred on the marginal seat of Robertson, currently held by the Labor Party and represented by Dr

Gordon Reid. We hope to emulate the work undertaken during the 2022 Federal election when the next campaign begins, with the same vigour. At the last election this entailed manning polling and pre-polling booths, wobble boarding, organising events, phoning and encouraging members and supporters to lobby their local MP, participating in candidates' forums and distributing ABCF flyers at Gosford markets.

I am particularly grateful for the organisational skill and support of the following past and current committee members: Sue Young, our current Publicity Officer and Events Coordinator; Chris Moe, our former Secretary and current Newsletter Editor; Gillian Telford, our former Treasurer; and Jim Wootten, her successor. We have also been ably supported by two long-standing and dedicated members, Pippa Preston and Beverley Symons.

This year we have had increased

focus on the arts and its coverage by the ABC. In particular, our branch felt that former ABC National Arts reporter, Anne Maria Nicholson's visit in April resonated not only with our own audience, but also perhaps with ABC management. Her incisive speech gained widespread recognition.

With Council elections held across the state on 14 September, on Thursday 29 August we hosted local ABC radio presenter, Scott Levi. Scott discussed the types of issues the staff at ABC Central Coast have been reporting on and the hopes and concerns of Central Coast residents leading up to these elections.



Ross McGowen

Convenor ABC Friends Central Coast

Branch profile Northern Suburbs of Sydney (NSoS)

We meet on the 2nd Thursday of each month at the Roseville Uniting Church.

NSoS guest speakers include ABC presenters, producers, journalists, authors, performers, poets and those who have a connection to the ABC.

Join us and be inspired by our



guest speakers, NSoS Committee, friends, supporters, sometimes a young media intern and of course our Mezzo-Soprano Elizabeth Hylton hitting the high notes when she sings "It's Our ABC".

All are passionate about the ABC and know too well how important our national public broadcaster is in an age of fake news, hyper commercialisation and the undermining of democracy.

NSoS also has also given talks to u3a at Mosman, Hunters Hill, Chatswood, City and Berowra.

NSoS is currently campaigning for:

1. return of the NSW Schools Spectacular broadcast to ABC TV
2. formation of a bipartisan NSW Parliamentary ABC Friendship group
3. installation of interpretative signals at the former ABC TV Studios site at Gore Hill
4. restoration of the 2014-2022 funding cuts

Janine Kitson
Convener ABC Friends NSoS

Branch profile ACT & South East NSW

The ACT branch focuses on Canberra, but some of our activities also extend to neighbouring areas in NSW.

We hold a few market stalls each year at which we sell ABC Friends merchandise, such as T-shirts, aprons, tote bags and so on.

These provide a great opportunity to meet people, chat with them about the ABC and, on occasion, sign them up as ABC Friends. Our usual venues are suburban shopping centres, especially before Christmas, but we sometimes venture further afield to regional markets or take part in local events, such as seniors expos.

A regular activity is to hand out ABCF promo cards at Meet-the-Author events held at the Australian National University. These popular in-conversation gatherings attract substantial audiences, and we like to ensure we're present whenever there's an ABC personality taking part. Recent ABC participants have included Norman Swan, Laura



A market stall in Tuggeranong, southern Canberra

Tingle, Leigh Sales, Lisa Millar and Julia Baird. The organiser is happy to have us present as we help promote these ABC-related events to our members and supporters.

We take a keen interest in both positive and negative media articles on the ABC, and these are circulated to core members, often generating interesting email exchanges as well as keeping us in touch with each other.

Our branch has also been active in recent federal elections, both in the ACT and in neighbouring electorates of Gilmore and Eden-Monaro. We have sought candidates' views on a number of ABC issues and then, through newspaper ads and articles,

flyers, posters and information at polling booths, let voters know which candidates are the strongest (and weakest) supporters of the ABC.

For some years, the ACT branch has also contributed to ABC Friends at state and national levels. In recent times two or more of us have been committee members of the state branch, often serving as office bearers. A previous ACT branch convener also served as national treasurer, and currently one of our group is serving as a member of the national board.

Rob Kennedy
Branch Coordinator ABC Friends ACT & South East NSW

Branch profile

Eastern Suburbs

The Eastern Suburbs branch is fortunate to have a significant number of members and supporters (around 550 in total). In addition, we have some distinguished current and former ABC staff in the area who have been happy to discuss issues with us and support our activities.

The engine room has involved Nizza Siano, Sybille Frank, Susan Scott and me as Acting President. Our main focus has been federal elections. Sybille has rounded up a keen and enthusiastic team who have engaged with the public in markets, at train stations and at pre-polling. I have been a speaker at several pre-election events.

We have had a history of effective links with candidates in Wentworth.

The Labor and Green candidates have consistently indicated their strong support for an independent and better-funded ABC. In particular, both the former Wentworth member, Kerryn Phelps, and the current independent member, Allegra Spender, continued to be strong advocates for the ABC.

Nizza, Sybille, Susan and I will be meeting soon to discuss staging a local event and preparations for the next federal election.

Members' concerns

It is clear from our engagement with members and the local community that there remains very high concern about the plight of the ABC. The ABC is seen as woefully underfunded and deeply wounded by funding cuts and attacks since the late 1980s. The last dozen years have been calamitous and while the Labor government has improved ABC funding, much, much more is needed. In this era of misinformation and fake news, the role of

independent and well-funded public broadcasting is critical. The health of democracy is at stake.

The daily and relentless attacks on the ABC from the Murdoch/News Corp stable underline its importance. We are fortunate that Media Watch has provided a compelling record of this. It assists in reminding members of the importance of their support.

ABC Friends must keep up the good work, keeping in touch with members via its newsletters and events. Most importantly, we will need to prepare for the next federal election to ensure that a government is elected that is committed to a strong and independent ABC. Members may recall that the Federal Liberal Party passed a motion in 2018 supporting the privatisation of the ABC. It has not rescinded this motion. The future of the ABC is at stake in the forthcoming election.

Prof Ed Davis AM

Acting President ABC Friends Eastern Suburbs

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