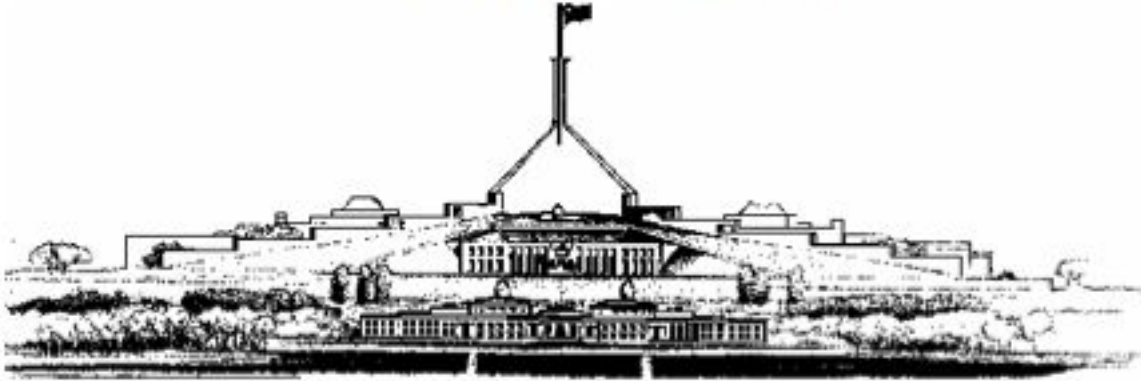




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Australian Broadcasting
Corporation Amendment (Rural
and Regional Measures) Bill 2019**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 31 July 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 31 July 2019</p> <p>Page 1510</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Fletcher, Paul, MP</p>	<p>Source House</p> <p>Proof No</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield—Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts) (09:32): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2019 amends the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* (ABC Act) to ensure regional communities are provided for in the functions of the corporation and represented on the ABC Board.

The ABC occupies an important place in the lives of regional communities. Over many decades, its services have informed and entertained communities in areas where other media options are limited.

This bill contains a range of measures to support and cement that role, and ensure the ABC continues to focus on and meet the diverse needs of rural and regional Australia.

I will now turn to the specifics of the bill.

Amending the ABC Charter to include regional and geographic diversity

One of the functions of the ABC, as stipulated by its charter, is to provide broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community.

The bill will broaden that mandate to ensure the charter makes specific reference to the function for the ABC's broadcasting programs to contribute to a sense of regional as well as national identity, and reflect the geographic as well as cultural diversity of the Australian community.

Most Australians would be surprised to learn that the charter currently has no such references. This is an important amendment that codifies the relationship that the ABC already has with regional Australia, and helps to ensure the organisation continues to provide services that are valued by, and reflect the needs of, rural and regional communities.

Establishment of a Regional Advisory Council

While the ABC Charter sets the broad mandate for the organisation, its capacity to deliver on that mandate necessitates having in place the right governance arrangements and operational structures. The ABC must be able to understand the needs and perspectives of regional areas if it is to well service rural and regional Australia.

To this end, the bill will require the ABC Board to establish a Regional Advisory Council within three months after the day the bill receives royal assent.

The role of this council will be to reflect the views of regional Australia, and the ABC Board will be obliged to consult with the council on any change to its broadcasting services that will have a substantial impact on regional Australia.

The Regional Advisory Council will be established by the ABC Board in the same manner as the existing ABC Advisory Council, under section 11 of the ABC Act.

The Regional Advisory Council will be made up of members who have a substantial connection to, or substantial experience in, a regional community through business, industry or community involvement.

Regional Advisory Council members will not be permitted to be members of another advisory ABC council or committee, and the ABC will be required to report on all consultations with the Regional Advisory Council through its annual report.

This amendment will ensure that a more formal mechanism is in place to ensure decisions of the ABC Board are taken after proper consultation with affected audiences.

ABC Board connection to regional Australia

The bill also makes changes to ensure a minimum level of representation by individuals with an understanding of rural and regional communities on the ABC Board.

The bill will require the ABC Board to have at least two appointed non-executive directors who have a substantial connection to, or substantial experience in, a regional community through business, industry or community involvement.

This measure will ensure that, at the highest level in the organisation, the needs and views of regional and rural areas are appropriately represented.

The bill will require the minister (in relation to non-executive directors) or the Prime Minister (in the case of the ABC chair) to table a statement in each house of the parliament outlining the person's substantial connection to, or substantial experience in, a regional community.

This provision allows the government to establish a 'baseline' for the regional skills of the ABC Board, and any future appointment processes will then need to take this into account.

Through its appointments to the ABC Board, the government has ensured that this new requirement will already be satisfied. This amendment has the effect that the ABC Board will always have at least two members who have an understanding of the needs of rural and regional communities.

Annual reporting obligations

Finally, the bill will introduce a number of additional annual reporting obligations for the ABC.

These will require the ABC to provide statistics on the number of individuals employed in regional and metropolitan areas.

This will include details on the number of journalists employed in regional areas, as well as the total number of hours of local or regional news bulletins broadcast each year.

This is important for transparency. It is appropriate that the parliament, and the Australian people, are able to see the deployment of staff and the production of local content.

Conclusion

As a whole, the bill contains a range of measures to strengthen the focus of the ABC on rural and regional communities. These constitute important safeguards for those Australians living outside the capital cities and larger metropolitan areas.

They will help to secure the outcome that our primary national broadcaster retains and deepens its connection to communities in the bush.

I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned.