

Submission to Colston Committee re: SBS/ABC merger

From: The personal collection of Dr Grisha Sklovsky, founding Chairman of SBS

Letter from Dr Grisha Sklovsky

Chairman and Members
Dear Sir,

As the founding Chairman of SBS, 1978 to 1981, and Board Member until 1983, I would like to add this short submission to your current hearings in spite of recent statements that this matter is now reaching its closing stages. This may be true now, but from past experience I feel that such closures are only temporary because some fundamentals built into the creation of SBS have been overlooked or swept under the carpet.

SBS has been created as an aid to the integration of some 20% of Australians into the fabric of this nation, without loss of individual dignity through having to deny one's roots, and for the benefit of all Australians, "new", "old" and not so old. It was designed after the ABC failed to act. The dual strands of **Ethnic Radio** and **Multicultural Television** are essential ingredients of the SBS, yet one rarely hears about the radio. When this should have been the ABC's task, this organisation proved itself singularly inept, unwilling and insensitive. Initial ethnic radio was placed into the hands of the ABC under the aegis of the Public Broadcasters (3ZZ). This confounded the issues and compounded the problems for a long time to come, because Public Broadcasters by definition are a minority group interested in minority issues, and are therefore divisive and unfit for the task of creating a harmonious, broader multicultural Australia.

1. The proposed "merger" with the ABC is dishonest

This is because its motivation is based on the eternal *idee fixe* of some senior members of the Communication Department who, while helping us to start up SBS, did all they could to prevent its operation and to obstruct our activities by adding to our workload. The time wasted in the early years in justifying our existence caused havoc in the vital work of our small senior staff. The channel allocation for TV speaks for itself and perusal of past files will show you not only the details, but also our ways to outrun the Sir Humphreys et al well before "Yes Minister" documented these methods.

2. Cost savings through the merger is a fallacy

When we created the staff establishment and general policies of the early SBS, we were proffered by the Department of Communication strong recommendations based on ABC methods and figures. We used these for how NOT to work, ie we cut much out and created a lean, active organisation, so that costs per minute broadcast or per metre of film shown were much smaller than those of the ABC. Integration of the ABC into the SBS might show cost reductions, not vice versa. Transfer of Radio Australia into the SBS could balance the numbers a little and place all ethnically sensitive work into one Unit. Has anyone costed the increased price to overseas programmes based on the wider ABC potential audience rather than on SBS figures? How many extra staff will be required for SBS to reach parity with the ABC?

3. The merger is not good for integration of Australians

The dual arm of ethnic radio for individual ethnic awareness and television as a bridging medium for all Australians who can see Channel 28, were meant to be an aid to all concerned with creating a better Australia through happier and prouder inhabitants. To attempt this was a daring task, which was achieved in spite of the many "helpers" and "critics" with a wide range of axes to grind, because success would reduce power bases of many divisive and therefore undesirable elements within our society. This of course created frictions, but a small, sensitive and ethnically attuned group (with not too many single issue people) was making considerable progress. How can the ABC consider some 55 language groups, each with many sub-groups, when they can barely handle the sensitivities of established Australians and after their long history of neglecting foreign languages, even when asked to do something towards it? It will take years for the ABC to display sensitivities in this field, not a hasty Bill and a few politicians' signatures.

4. The merger is politically silly

I am on record in talks with Ministers and Shadow Ministers that both Mr Whitlam and Mr Fraser were conned by ethnic pressurisers in believing that the "ethnic vote" exists. Ethnics used to have specific voting patterns, like other people, only with stronger traumas after their lives' experience. However, I do strongly believe that the "ethnic vote" will appear **against** whoever will abolish or rape the SBS... and the proposed merger falls into that category because it will show publicly that the initiators of such action not only lack sensitivity in demoting the SBS to become an arm of the ABC like Rural Affairs or even Sport, but thereby display their contempt for true integration steps displayed by SBS.

5. Co-operation between ABC and SBS

Of course it is essential that both Government financed broadcasters cooperate closely in the use of scarce resources. Perusal of files in both ABC and SBS should show members of the Committee how this was handled by the ABC at the time when we required trial TV transmissions or other assistance based on their under-used resources. Such co-operation should be cemented through a high level steering committee. In time the SBS might work itself out of a job especially if there will be fewer newcomers and the ABC might mature and mellow sufficiently to become a nationally cementing service rather than a divider of the Australian community as it has been and still is frequently.

Until such time, both services have their roles. Convergence is desirable and should be a policy for both but not a drastic change which will save no money yet spoil a good product and damage political reputations of the instigators.

Yours faithfully

Dr Grisha Sklovsky, AM, FRACI