

31 August 2023

Director, National Broadcasters Section
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,
Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
Canberra ACT 2601
nationalbroadcasters@communications.gov.au

Dear Sir/ Madam,

RE: Review of options to support the independence of the national broadcasters

The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) welcomes the opportunity to provide brief comment on the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts' consultation paper, reviewing options to support the independence of the national broadcasters.

We also take this opportunity to reiterate our support for efforts to strengthen independence across all news outlets including public service media and highlight the need for strong and transparent governance principles across the industry.

The public broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), are a cornerstone of public interest journalism in Australia through their reach, local presence, and the very high levels of trust by the community. The localised ABC radio is vital for local news, including its role as emergency infrastructure in times of crisis, as is the SBS for its multilingual news production informing communities, while minimising reliance on less reliable sources; and contributing to social cohesion. According to the University of Canberra's *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*, the two public broadcasters remain the most trusted sources for news in Australia (66%). The report also found 60% recognise the importance of public broadcasters to Australian society, increasing to 67% for those concerned about misinformation.¹

PIJI has [consistently advocated](#) for long term, stable funding terms for Australia's national broadcasters and commend the Australian Government's commitment to 5-year funding terms for the national broadcasters implemented in the May 2023 budget. As two of the largest producers of public interest journalism in the country, funding certainty - and independence in those arrangements from electoral cycles - remain essential to ensuring their contribution to a diverse and pluralist Australian news sector by news scale, format, language, coverage and voice among other measures. To avoid real term funding erosion as previously experienced, benchmarks could be considered against economic indices such as the Consumer Price Index as well as public interest journalism indices such as localism and diversity measures currently being contemplated by the ACMA under a news measurement framework.

High quality governance of public service media, including standards of governance, performance and accountability as set out in the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* - alongside commercial and political independence - are critically linked to trust. PIJI believes that transparency around the appointment processes for the ABC and SBS boards is essential for

¹ Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

ensuring strong governance and public trust in these institutions, including the establishment of a transparent, skills-based selection criteria for membership of the Nominations Committee². PIJI also recommends transparent methodology for appointments made by the Minister, on advice of the Nominations Committee, that is subject to reasonable scrutiny. Moreover, any Ministerial-approved appointments should be released within a reasonable time period, for example, within 45 days of appointment.

PIJI re-emphasises the call to de-politicise the selection criteria for Board appointments and include demonstrable engagement with public interest journalism and appreciations of its centrality to a healthy democracy.

PIJI would be pleased to provide further comment or detail as required.

Yours sincerely,



Anna Draffin
Chief Executive Officer



² Disclosure: Professor Derek Wilding, current member of the Nominations Committee is also Chair of PIJI's Expert Research Panel.