ABC Board should not be a Secret Society

The ABC Board should operate with greater public transparency.

In a letter to the editor on 17.6.04, Jack Clancy, FABC Vic Vice-president wrote: “Australian Stock Exchange chairman Maurice Newman was right to resign from the ABC Board, but not for the reasons he provided.

Under a system which does not require appointments to be made on merit, Mr Newman was appointed to the ABC Board along with others perceived to be politically aligned to the Coalition Government. Recently, a letter from the ABC staff-elected director to the Board and subsequent media investigations led to the public learning of Mr Newman’s actions which resulted in the allocation of scarce ABC funds for a bias-monitoring scheme sure to please the Government.

It is not surprising, then, that Mr Newman is displeased with what he claims to be a “gross breach of boardroom confidentiality on the issue of independent monitoring of ABC broadcasts”. But it is alarming that he is unwilling to stay on the board because the staff-elected director refuses to sign away her rights, indeed her responsibility, to act according to her conscience.

All board members have responsibilities above their allegiance to the board on which they sit. Too often there have been serious consequences, in Australia and abroad, when individual members of corporate boards have placed board confidentiality above the long-term good of the body they oversee.

It is not in the public’s interest to have the ABC Board operate in total secrecy. The community is entitled to be informed about important matters affecting the operations of the country’s most significant information and cultural institution.

In making possible the position of staff-elected director, the ABC Act has ensured in this instance that at least one member of the ABC Board has broadcasting experience. It has also provided one small counter to governments which stack the Board.

Efforts to gag the staff-elected director should be condemned. Political abuse and interference in the ABC must cease.

Before any further appointments are made, a new system of board appointments must be introduced – one which operates at arms length from governments of any political persuasion and which will deliver board members with the capacity and commitment to ensure the ABC flourishes.”

New ABC Board appointment system needed NOW