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**Centre for Corporate Public Affairs'
Annual Corporate Public Affairs Oration**

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From time to time, I'm asked to speak to journalism students about what it's like working in a news room.

I often reflect that for all the planning you can do around big news events—an election, a budget, The Olympics—almost by definition, the biggest stories are those you can't predict, you didn't know were about to erupt.

These kinds of stories are sometimes fascinating, sometimes appalling. But they get the adrenaline running in the newsroom.

Thinking about it now, I suspect that those of us running corporate affairs, as you do—or running a corporation as I do—don't hanker for the adrenaline rushes quite so much!

But things happen. As Harold McMillan said when asked what were the greatest challenges a leader faces in public life, "*Events, my dear boy, events.*"

So - given the events of the week including the government's announcement of an inquiry into the events surrounding Monday's Q&A plus the commentary and questions that have erupted about the role of the ABC - I thought it would be appropriate to address some of these issues with you tonight.

As you know, Monday's edition of Q&A triggered very significant debate and controversy. A man who had been tried and acquitted of planning a terrorist attack, who pleaded guilty to threatening to kill ASIO officials, applied to be in the studio audience and to ask a question.

It is not as though this man was unknown to the media. He'd appeared on numerous occasions previously across a number of networks. He'd been in the Q&A audience before.

As someone said to me this week, free speech arguments would be easier if you were always defending Martin Luther King. At times, free speech principles mean giving platforms to those with whom we fundamentally disagree.

It was the crux of the Charlie Hebdo argument last year and of course, the source of the maxim that was used to describe Voltaire's beliefs—"*I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*"

Media organisations often give airtime to the criminal and the corrupt. To those who express views that run contrary to accepted public values. You have to set the bar very high before you begin to exclude certain views or perspectives.

We still need to hear in order to gain insight into thinking, into motivation. To understand the root cause of behaviours and actions that we might find confronting and alarming, or worse.

The man who appeared on Q&A had been given considerable space by numerous media outlets in recent years. If giving him space or time to express his views is an act of sedition, then the round up of the seditious will take some time and include, I should add, *The Australian* newspaper which ran an extensive article on him in 2012, charting his journey from when terrorism charges were first laid against him. He also graced the pages of *The Courier-Mail*.

However, as we said at the ABC on Tuesday morning, other issues were triggered by giving this man a forum on live television through Q&A that are not free speech issues. I can see circumstances where a question asked by this man could have been broadcast, just as other controversial figures have asked questions on Q&A before, like Julian Assange.

The risks and uncertainties of having him in a live programming environment weren't adequately considered before the decision was made to accept his application to be in the studio audience.

It's one thing to pre-record an interview and exercise editorial judgment on the content before you put it to air. But live television doesn't give you that option. And in Q&A's case, it took place with a large studio audience present. The ABC's immediate statement, on Tuesday morning, made this clear.

These things needed to have been thought through carefully and referred up internally. We have detailed upward referral on editorial judgment at the ABC to help guide thinking in complex or contentious matters.

We're also aware of potential security issues and are, in fact, talking to the AFP to ensure they are completely appropriate for the program.

Now there are some ABC staff, present and past, who argue that to make any concession in the face of criticism is to buckle. Who say it's a sign of weakness. Respectfully I disagree.

It's not weakness to say you made the wrong call. We have no problem with that. People who are equally well-meaning will often make different judgments. The judgments that count in this matter are the ones made by those paid to make them. Those at the program, and those in the editorial chain-of-command above them that leads to me, reporting to the Board.

The ABC is reviewing the decision-making processes around Q&A in light of this experience. This is happening internally, now. And the Board had previously determined that Q&A would form part of this year's series of independent editorial reviews it commissions.

It will be undertaken by someone external to the ABC and will look across all aspects of the program across a range of episodes. Its considered findings will be released later in the year.

The ABC will co-operate with the Government's snap inquiry, which is to report back next Tuesday.

We know that live television is dangerous. That it can be unpredictable and compelling. Part of the success of Q&A is that the audience knows it's live. It's event programming. And viewing numbers increased significantly when the show commenced broadcasting live tweets on the screen. Many in the audience leaned in, got even more involved.

Q&A has a lot of moving parts—pulling together the panel, bussing people in from all over the place, getting a balanced studio audience, selecting the questions and tweets. It's hardly a straight-forward proposition, and that's further fueled by the electricity of the live production.

I admire those who accept what can be the ultimate challenge of being on the panel, to test their arguments and their wit, live in front of a million people. The studio crowd can be rowdy, vocal, unforgiving. It is easy to find excuses not to come on the panel, but to say yes, to turn up—you need ticker. It's a Todd Sampsonesque piece of heroics. You're on the high wire without a net. And that's not just the panel—it's the same every week for the host and the senior producers.

As we know, Q&A engages audiences and it triggers a response from them too. People will not be happy with every panel or questioner or tweet. Not every editorial judgment made will be right. The show generates passion like few others. No program is more heavily scrutinised by audiences and critics.

I feel that Q&A has all the potential of being a 20+ year franchise for the ABC, so we need to treat it with care. Like *Four Corners*, it's a show that should endure when all current management and production teams are long gone, an enduring part of Australian public life. Those of us who have responsibility for it now are trustees for its future.

Amidst this week's controversy, I don't want to lose sight of the terrific achievements of Q&A. Extraordinary programs on mental health and AIDS. The remarkable program from the Garma forum. Shanghai. Delhi. Those times we felt we were having a really intelligent, engaging national conversation around the things that matter most.

And while we remember these special episodes, it is also worth remembering that our highest rating Q&A episodes are often the regular ones where politicians and community leaders thrash out the issues of the week. It has become a staple in the lives of many Australians, every Monday night.

We will reflect on the events of this week, have the program independently reviewed and look to ensure that it pursues and delivers its potential to be public broadcasting at its best – to inform, to educate and to entertain.

The media firestorm that has erupted around Monday's Q&A was ferocious, but as a public broadcaster, the ABC goes through these from time to time. At times I have felt that, compared to our Commonwealth public broadcasting cousins in the UK and Canada, we go through relatively few.

But even for the ABC, things seemed to have been taken to a new level when on Wednesday we scored four covers on one day in the News Limited tabloids, complete with photoshopped ABC flags being waved by jihadi protestors. Not all parties to the conversation have seemed vested in pursuing a rational discourse.

A question was posed this week. Whose side is the ABC on? It's not the first time it's been asked. Menzies, Hawke, Neville Wran—they all asked it in their own inimitable ways.

It's a good question. And while it's often asked with a rhetorical flourish, a question about the role and nature of the public broadcaster in these highly polarized and partisan times, it's a fair one.

Sometimes it seems questions like this are framed to cause doubt. To challenge what we have always felt. And while rhetorical questions are designed to be posed and not answered, I want to answer this one.

It's important.

Whose side is the ABC on?

Well in any team, you can be playing on the same side, but often you will be playing in a different position, with a different role and responsibility. You're on the same side, but with a different job to do. You do your bit and you work together to make the team successful.

The ABC is clearly Australian, it's on the side of Australia. The A in ABC is for Australian. And the part we play, what we do for the side, is a vital one, central to our culture and our democracy - that of being an independent public broadcaster.

The ABC's Charter covers our responsibility to Australians who live in this country and also Australians living overseas. Our wide, diverse programming reaches Australians everywhere across the land.

Inside the ABC, we talk about wanting to be the independent home of Australian conversations, culture and stories.

Central to the legislation establishing the Corporation is the independence of the public broadcaster. Funded by Government, accountable to the public for its performance, governed by a Board of eminent, independent Australians.

And of course, it's precisely this independence that shapes the ABC as a public broadcaster, not a state broadcaster.

A state broadcaster is the communications arm of the Government. Its role is to communicate the messages of the Government—and certainly not to do anything that undermines the Government.

I hope no-one seriously wants the ABC to be a state broadcaster.

We know the examples. North Korea and Russia. China and Vietnam. There are many others.

But that has never been the role of a public broadcaster here, a public broadcaster formed in the tradition set out by Lord Reith the first head of the BBC, who spoke of a duty to inform, educate and entertain.

The Reithian tradition shapes the history of the ABC. Its independence enshrined in legislation and entrusted to the Board.

The ABC Act does not envisage the ABC as another branch of Government public relations. Instead, it asks the ABC to provide an *independent* national broadcasting service. And the Board is asked to maintain that independence.

The ABC's Editorial Policies state that "*the trust and respect of the community depend on the ABC's editorial independence and integrity. Independence and responsibility are inseparable.*"

The first editorial policy says to maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC.

There are good reasons for independence from Government, just as there are good reasons for an independent judiciary.

Australians cherish freedom of expression, and they cherish debate. They cherish the role of the ABC in facilitating both.

When we were planning television in Australia sixty years ago, we came up with our own model, an Australian model that offered us the best of both worlds.

When it came to the public broadcasting side of it, we didn't do what the British had done when they made the BBC a monopoly.

We didn't do what the Americans had done, creating public television only later on, almost an afterthought of the Johnson presidency.

We didn't do what Italy had done, with three national channels allocated to three leading political parties. Nor did we follow the French example, where the top jobs at the public broadcaster would change when the party in Government changed.

In Australia, when Governments change, we *could* change the public broadcasters with them, align them to more positively reflect the Government's agenda, to do the Government's bidding.

But you would have to change the ABC Act.

And you would have to destroy the ABC as we have known it for eight decades.

Instead, Australia has an independent ABC and that independence is key to its credibility. It's why trust in the ABC is streets ahead of commercial media. The *Essential Poll* conducted earlier this week demonstrates that far more Australians put their trust in ABC TV news and current affairs, than other media outlets.

It's why the ABC is one of the most trusted institutions in the country, along with the High Court and the Reserve Bank.

I think you'll find that in Australia, as in every country where public broadcasting exists, "*The most trusted public broadcasters are those that are perceived as closest to the public, and most distant from the government*", as the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard noted in its review of NYU's research paper *Public Media and Political Independence*.

The history of the ABC is a history that shows the anger and frustration of Government at ABC broadcasts from time to time. Ken Inglis' two histories of the ABC document these stoushes at length.

Those of you with longer memories will recall the harsh criticism dished out by the Hawke Government over the ABC's coverage of the first Gulf War.

In my nearly nine years at the ABC, when we've had Governments both Labor and Liberal, there have been ABC stories that generated the wrath of the Government of the day. Monday's Q&A is but the most recent example.

Of course there will be stories that frustrate politicians. Of course there will be coverage that's not of their choosing. But my experience has been that *most* politicians have understood the importance of the independence of the public broadcaster from political pressure and interference. It's a mark of the maturity of our democracy.

Most—though some, aren't reluctant to turn up the heat now and again to see what happens.

Long may that independence continue.

And as it does, it is vital the ABC appreciates that independence and responsibility are inseparable.

The ABC is not perfect, and while it sets high standards, it won't always meet them. There will be poor journalistic practice or poor editorial judgment shown occasionally, and criticism of the ABC will be well founded.

Good journalism is strengthened by setting the record straight. That's a responsibility as well. The finest media outlets are those who, in taking accuracy and the truth seriously, willingly concede error. And then put things right.

Of course, there are times when someone thinks a story is inaccurate when it's simply speaking an inconvenient truth. Other times stories will cause frustration and embarrassment—to Government, to business, to unions, to leading social institutions. That's what public accountability is all about.

Stories that people would rather not have been told. Stories that are immediately attacked, but over time are revealed to be right and of overwhelming public importance.

Witness the Royal Commission into the institutional response to child sexual assault. The ABC was at the forefront of uncovering the stories that led the establishment of the landmark review. Look *Four Corners* and *Lateline's* coverage of endemic poverty and appalling living standards in Indigenous communities.

Journalism served the public interest in bringing the corruption in Queensland under Premier Bjelke-Peterson to light. In revealing the

appalling treatment of customers by financial planners at the Commonwealth Bank, cruelty in the greyhound industry, the callous behaviour of James Hardie, the deception of cash for comment in commercial radio.

The ABC serves the public interest in this way through hundreds of stories a week, from the biggest cities to small country towns.

These are the contributions made by an independent public broadcaster. *Independent* from pressure by advertisers or proprietors. *Independent* from the need to maximise sales or advertising. *Independent* from a Government dictating the coverage it wants or needs.

Independent from these pressures but responsible under the ABC Act to deliver journalism that is accurate and impartial to the recognised standards of objective journalism.

It's journalism that means speaking truth to power. Pushing for disclosure and transparency. Seeking to verify that which we are asked to take on trust. Asking difficult questions. And bringing to light views that are very different to ours, being challenged and confronted—to increase our understanding and insight, if not our acceptance.

The stakes don't get any higher than when reporting on national security. Not just in keeping citizens safe, but keeping our nation *sound* as well as safe—our privacy protected, our democracy robust, ensuring the integrity of our institutions, the honesty of our politicians and that our rights as citizens are being respected.

In doing this important work in our journalism, the ABC is also held to account for our decisions and our performance.

The ABC's accountability mechanisms are more robust than those of any other media organisation in the country.

The Annual Report details the operations of the independent complaints division run by the ABC that looks into every material complaint submitted by audiences. The A.C.M.A. can review decisions made by that complaints division.

At least three times a year there are public Senate hearings where, along with other ABC Executives, I answer a vast range of questions for hours—and hundreds of others are put on notice.

Detailed reporting on the ABC's expenditure goes to the Department of Finance in Canberra.

Even our own program, *Media Watch*, casts a critical eye as intently over the ABC as it does other media outlets.

The ABC Board is now commissioning its own independent reviews of editorial content to go alongside the extensive financial auditing process. These reviews are just part of the Board's response to its editorial responsibilities under the Act.

It is unparalleled compared to any other media organisation in the country, and rightly so. We are spending taxpayers dollars and with the right to practice our craft, comes responsibility and accountability for performance.

Much of what I have discussed tonight goes to our journalism – a vital part of what we do. But it is only part. Only part of the role we play.

I have sometimes had to say to politicians that they do seem to get obsessed about 2% of the ABC's content—usually the part that's about them or the issues their polling currently says is important.

But the ABC is for all Australians and it's much bigger and broader and richer than that.

Political content certainly gets the attention of our audiences. They engage with *Q&A*, *Insiders*, *7.30*, *AM* and *PM*.

But if you look at the numbers, this is but a small fraction of the audience's ABC experience across radio and television, online and mobile. From *Play School* to Charlie Pickering, from Matt and Alex to *Mad as Hell*, to our famous medicos, Dr Norman Swan and Dr Lucien Blake—they represent the ABC for millions of Australians for hours every week.

We celebrate Australia at the ABC. We celebrate important national events and the lives of Australians. The great, the unknown.

Witness our coverage on Anzac Day. Dawn Services around the country, marches in capital cities, commemorations from Anzac Cove and Lone Pine.

And on Australia Day, bringing the stories of the Australians of the Year and the National Flag Raising and Citizenship Ceremony.

Having national conversations on absolutely crucial matters like mental health during our *Mental As* week.

Bringing Australians together to raise \$5m in just a few days for relief efforts in Nepal.

We have been doing this kind of work for years and years.

In November we commemorate 70 years of *The Country Hour*. Next year marks 20 years of *Australian Story*. Since 1932 on radio we have had local voices, telling local stories to local communities.

As *The Sydney Morning Herald* noted when the ABC turned 75—you would still *have* an Australia without the ABC, but it wouldn't be *this* Australia.

This Australia owes much to the ABC. Because the ABC is an indispensable part of Australian life and part of the lives of millions of Australians each day.

That's why well over 80% of Australians believe the ABC provides a valuable service.

It's valuable when it discovers brilliant new Australian musical talent that will conquer the world through *triple j unearthed*.

Valuable when we listen to the beautiful work of ABC composers recorded by the ABC Classics label.

Valuable when we hear Jim Maxwell, in the dead of night, calling the Ashes from England.

Valuable when we're listening to the birdsong on Macca on a Sunday morning.

When we're absorbed by the best television drama of the year—*The Secret River*. And the most compelling docudrama for a decade, *The Killing Season*, which led to the cry during Question Time last week, “*Thank you to the ABC*”.

The work of the ABC, what it adds to our lives, reminds me of the words of the US physicist Robert Wilson. Wilson had been called to testify at a congressional hearing in the late 1960s. He was being challenged by Senator John Pastore about the rationale for the government spending \$250m on a new scientific investment. Pastore asked whether Wilson's work had anything to do with promoting "*the security of the country*".

Wilson said it didn't—none at all. But he then pointed out this kind of work "only has to do with the respect with which we regard one another, the dignity of men, our love of culture. . . . It has to do with whether we are we good painters, good sculptors, great poets? I mean all the things we really venerate in our country and are patriotic about. . . . It has nothing to do directly with defending our country—*except to make it worth defending.*"

And that is the key answer to the question about the role ABC plays in Australia, the part we play on the team.

For we are the independent home of Australian conversations and culture and stories.

Reaching Australians everywhere on radio and television, online and mobile.

Celebrating achievement. Sharing discoveries. Uncovering truths.

Talking about the things that matter. A place where Australians can come to talk and listen, to watch, to share.

Helping us understand each other and this country better.

To help make Australia, *Australia*.

And that's how we fulfill our part on the team.