

Interview: MacPhee

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Ian MacPhee, Shadow Minister for Communications

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Red Harrison, AM, ABC Radio: The Opposition spokesman for communications, Mr Ian MacPhee, is opposed to a merger of the ABC and SBS. He told Mark Llewellyn he didn't think the interests of ethnic communities would be served by an ABC takeover.

Mr MacPhee: I'm convinced that there is great virtue in the two continuing. I do believe very strongly that the SBS is fulfilling a need which the ABC has not fulfilled and if it's facing budget cuts would most certainly not fulfill. The SBS would be totally subsumed within the ABC and that in fact would be a loss culturally and in terms of alternative programming for the Australian public.

But there's a further point. The Government might think it's going to save money this way, but the Connor report which the Government itself commissioned, showed that money would not be saved and indeed the work practices and staff structure of the ABC are more expensive than those of the SBS. If the SBS services were to continue it would actually cost the merged organisation more.

Mark Llewellyn: But wouldn't it lead possibly though to economies of scale, more efficient use of resources?

Mr MacPhee: No it wouldn't. As it is the SBS operates on a shoestring budget and it does so magnificently. The ABC could do with some more economies, I believe. And I believe the management is well aware of that and on the way to achieving those. I don't believe they'd be achieved by virtue of this merger. On the contrary, it would only confuse the administrative reforms that are going on within the ABC itself.

Mark Llewellyn: But there are people who would argue it's totally extravagant to have in Australia two Government-funded public broadcasting systems.

Mr MacPhee: Well, I know that there might appear to be so from the outside, but when you examine the administration of both of them you will see it's not an extravagance and I believe that the continued existence of the SBS represents a very important discipline on the ABC. And I'm convinced that for the time being Australia would be well served by having two national broadcasters, especially in television, where the programs can be complementary, each of them catering for slightly different audiences and each of them again different from those served by the commercial television stations.