



Budget News Release 17 May 2018

Labour's public media policies must not repeat previous under-funding mistakes

The government's announcement of \$15m additional funding for public media services is welcome but it falls well short of Labour's election manifesto promise to provide '*\$38m a year in additional funding for quality New Zealand programming and journalism*'.

Better Public Media is concerned that this shortfall in funding means Labour's commitment to expand Radio New Zealand into RNZ+ will be delayed or compromised. It is doubtful that \$15m will be sufficient to develop RNZ+ into a non-commercial television service as well as fulfilling Labour's other commitments to support investigative journalism.

Despite the promise of further funding in future years, such a paltry sum is insufficient to meaningfully redress the damage done to public media under the preceding three governments.

BPM Chair, Dr. Peter Thompson commented that "Minister Curran's plan to redevelop RNZ+ as a multi-platform public service correctly identified an important gap in New Zealand media. It would bring New Zealanders the screen content that we need - nightly current affairs, non-commercial programmes for children and young people, regular documentaries on arts, science, music and everything else going on in this wonderful country. But successfully re-establishing a commercial-free public channel cannot be done on the cheap. The funding level has to match the policy vision."

Under previous Labour governments, both the TVNZ Charter and the TVNZ 6/7 set-up were undermined by intra-cabinet budget wrangling that resulted in insufficient funding. Between 2003 and 2008, TVNZ's Charter received roughly \$95m in funding but the broadcaster paid out \$142m in dividends.

"One would have hoped that Labour would have learned from its past policy mistakes, so it is very disappointing that the budget has not delivered on their election commitments," said Peter Thompson. "Of course, there are many pressing policy priorities like housing and health. But the relatively minor cost of improved public media is a small price to pay for healthy democracy, cultural identity and informed discussion of those larger issues."

The Ministerial Advisory Group set up to make recommendations on the Public Media Funding Commission and the distribution of the additional funding between RNZ and NZ On Air now has a difficult challenge. If the \$15m in the budget is further divided, the limited initial investment in RNZ+ risks not having the impact needed to justify further ministerial claims for future funding increases.

"Ideally, there would be enough in the budget to cover the cost of both RNZ+ and expanding NZ On Air's funding of investigative journalism. Even the \$38m originally promised would still leave New Zealand lagging well behind the public media funding levels of most comparable economies," said Thompson. "The Better Public Media Trust has previously proposed a marginal levy system across a wide range of media services. Even at a very low rate of 0.5 percent this could potentially raise up to \$80m in revenue- and that level of funding would make a substantial difference to the sorts of public media policies that can realistically be considered."