

10 June 2014

Public Broadcasting Needs To Be An Election Issue

The Coalition for Better Broadcasting is calling on all political parties to commit to a three-pronged plan to strengthen public service broadcasting in New Zealand.

The three points of the plan are:

1. Defrost Radio NZ funding
2. Establish a non-commercial television channel
3. Fund these with a small levy on SkyTV and other commercial broadcasters, and on ISPs/Telcos

“These three policies would virtually guarantee the long-term survival of Radio NZ and a new public service television channel, without political influence by politicians playing hardball with funding,” says the Chief Executive of the CBB, Myles Thomas.

Radio NZ

Mr Thomas points out that Radio NZ is the country’s favourite radio broadcaster with 500,000 regular listeners. “Market research shows that an astounding four fifths of all New Zealanders think Radio NZ is ‘valuable’ to New Zealand.”

“Yet this national taonga is at breaking point as a result of a freeze in funding since 2008. Even back then an independent report said Radio NZ was under-resourced and recommended increases of \$6m plus. Instead the government funding freeze has effectively cut the budget by 9% after inflation. Radio NZ has survived without complaining but CEO, Paul Thompson recently admitted *How much longer can we cut the cloth? Not much longer.*”

“It is inevitable the freeze will begin to undermine the quality of our only public service broadcaster, something the vast majority of New Zealanders will not be happy about.”

A non-commercial television channel

Since the demise of the Charter and TVNZ 6 & 7, New Zealand television audiences have become paupers. The programming content available to New Zealanders is now little more than reality tv, shopping channels, news as entertainment and swathes of foreign drama.

“The government has proven that funding television content instead of television channels has resulted in less local programmes being made and a poorer range of content, with many genres now ‘extinct’ in NZ. Contrary to popular belief, online audiences are not yet strong enough and won’t be for at least ten years as technology reaches the rest of the population.

TVNZ 7 showed there are vast and hungry audiences out there for intelligent programming. It is up to politicians to take the bold step to commit to a public service television channel for all New Zealanders today and for future generations.

The Levy

Mr Thomas says it is important that public service broadcasting is funded in a way that is sustainable, and isn’t prey to changing government whims. A tiny levy of 1% on the revenue of ISPs and commercial broadcasters like SkyTV would ensure independent funding in perpetuity.

Levies are commonplace through every sector of business. Broadcasters pay levies to fund the Broadcasting Standards Authority, the Radio Spectrum Management Unit and ISPs pay levies for the Rural Broadband Initiative. The Commerce Minister Craig Foss recently created a levy on all company returns to fund the Financial Markets Authority. So it’s not the big scary tax that some try to portray it as.

Like most levies, it will effectively cost broadcasters and ISPs nothing as they pass it on to their customers. And this solution will fund non-commercial television and radio without drawing on limited government funds.

Summary

These policies will be popular among voters across the political spectrum and have long-lasting, tangible benefits for New Zealand. The CBB hopes that all parties will adopt these policies and ensure a renaissance of public service broadcasting in New Zealand.

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