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## Public Service Broadcasting Seeks Unity: Australia's ABC, CBC/Radio Canada & RNZ New Zealand Bosses Talk Teaming To Combat Global Streaming

By [Jesse Whittock](#)

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Every year, around 20 of the world's most influential public broadcasters get together to discuss the issues of the day such as the challenge from global streaming platforms, rights and the very purpose of their existence. The Public Broadcasters International conference is part-debate, part-agenda setting and part-pep talk in truth.

Last week, the Global Task Force — which comprises the BBC, France Télévisions, KBS, [CBC](#)/Radio Canada, the ABC, ZDF, RNZ and SVT — headed to Tokyo for the latest confab. Once there, CBC/Radio-Canada CEO and President and Global Task Force Chair Catherine Tait delivered an impassioned rallying cry to her PSB colleagues.

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Her focus was on building a “united global voice” for public service media, with the speech ending: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others. Alone — faced with the reach and heft of the global players — we risk losing our audiences. Together, we are stronger.”



DEADLINE

**CBC/Radio Canada's Catherine Tait speaks at the PBI conference, alongside RNZ's Paul Thompson (L) and ABC's David Anderson (R)**

Harry Lock / PBI

Before the speech, Deadline sat down virtually with Tait, Managing Director of Australia's ABC David Anderson and Paul Thompson, CEO of New Zealand's RNZ, to get their views on the global and domestic future.

Locally, CBC/Radio Canada is going through a rough license renewal process that has upset some of the local production community, who are concerned prescribed baseline production levels could fall. Tait told us that she was “hopeful” the new, lighter-touch regulation system could be established with more focus on spend on digital commissions (previously not counted towards quotas) and investment in representing Canadian diversity.

spoken publicly about the report before, didn't comment directly but said: "I do think any organization should be evolving. It's about how you organize yourselves to make the best decisions possible."

New Zealand public broadcaster RNZ, meanwhile, will merge with [TVNZ](#) next year to create the Aotearoa New Zealand Public Media, and Thompson provided some color on what that means for the country. "The world continues to be an incredibly turbulent place, so this is about ensuring New Zealanders have access to at least one resilient, comprehensive, trusted public media entity," he said.

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"It's about bigger aspirations around reflecting our identity and diversity of content and connecting and informing, but this is also an insurance policy in terms of trusted media in troubling times."

Read on for more about the state of public service media.

## **DEADLINE: *Where is public broadcasting at right now?***

**Catherine Tait:** We've had some very challenging years with the pandemic but important years for public service broadcasting. The news cycle has been so profoundly hyper-speed that our audience numbers and ratings have lifted, and we've had engagement with our domestic audiences that we've really not seen in a long time. On the one hand, we come out of this kind of pandemic wave with a buoyant audience relationship, but at the same time, we have big challenges that lie ahead, whether that's from global streamers, or from issues like online violence to journalists.

**David Anderson:** It's a testament that people turned to public broadcasting for information they can trust. They want valuable content and analysis they can interpret themselves to understand what's happening, and we're the natural counter to misinformation and fear mongering. The challenge for us is to position ourselves such that future generations know that that's what we're there for. You need to remain trusted, relevant and valued into the future.

**Paul Thompson:** Strong public systems strongly correlate to freedom of expression, rule of law and high trust, so despite everything the world is going through, public media still has a very important role. While we often assume the rest of the world shares our values on democracy and freedom of expression, most of the world actually has a form of authoritarian government, and freedom of expression is under threat. We have to remind ourselves of the importance of the mission but also take a dose of humility here: the days of public service broadcasting dominating the market for talent, programming and audiences are long gone. Most of us are really having to innovate and adapt to the power of global platforms.

**DA:** We have to be strategic to fit in. There is a plethora of choice in the entertainment space and a limited amount of funding, so you have to position yourself and stress that ‘local’ works. Part of the mandate of any PSB is to reflect the culture and the people you serve — ‘nothing about us without us.’ But there are pressures on costs – in Australia they’ve gone up 20% per hour annually for the past two or three years, so you have to start thinking about quality or quantity.

**CT:** When I first started at CBC I said “local is the new national” and I’ve changed that soundbite to “local is the new global.” Proximity is the absolute single most important competitive advantage that we have – we have an increasingly diverse population thanks to an influx of immigration over the past 15 years. That’s something that a global streamer, just by virtue of their structure, cannot do.

We’ve had to ask some pretty hard questions about where we’re going to spend those precious dollars that we have. Is it uniquely Canadian, and does it reflect the diverse nature of our people? I’ve spoken before about *Sort Of* and you have to think to yourself who else would tell the story of a non-binary Pakistani nanny? Those choices become very important.

**DEADLINE: *Where else can public broadcast services make a difference?***

**PT:** The streaming world is quite congested and I think there is going to be massive consolidation around the services. We need to play a long game – as well as expressions of public identity we have proven we’re durable institutions. We’ll be there when the current streaming world has peaked and is ebbing, and I expect opportunities to open up. We need to provide those stepping stones for our journalists, indie producers and our communities in the future.

**DEADLINE: *What role did the pandemic play on the plans to merge RNZ with TVNZ?***

**PT:** The policy predates the pandemic, but it probably did cause our government to think a little bit more about the sustainable future for public media in New Zealand. Frankly, there were probably other ways of tackling the policy challenge, but I can see the logic of creating one entity and making sure the increased public funding they’re going to put in will create a really strong, sustainable entity.

**DEADLINE: *Canada, Australia and New Zealand all have production sectors that create an outsized number of international hits, in comparison to their populations. How do you get that right?***

**PT:** One of the big challenges that any public media entity has is to represent the production community or labor groups. You’re not going to do that by buying up tonnes of independent producers so that they are all in house. Instead, you have to foster independent producers as a way to build up talent.

**CT:** We have a highly regulated history in Canada and are required to commission at least 80% of what we do from independent producers. We really spend a lot of time on the emerging talent piece of the puzzle. We hope the bigger players won't just cherry-pick after we've done all the development work, but unfortunately that does happen.

If we don't get it right with the independent production sector, we really miss a great opportunity to achieve that relevance – the value proposition for the creative industry in Canada. But we're the largest commissioner of original programs of national importance and contribute about C\$1.5BN (\$1.1B) to the creative economy, so when opposing forces say, "Defund the CBC," we say, "Well, if you do that, you gut the independent production sector."

**DEADLINE: *The latest CBC license renewal has been fraught, with indie body the CMPA claiming it will remove the demand for CBC to work with producers at prescribed levels. The regulator, the CRTC, is now re-evaluating its content. Where are you with that?***

**CT:** Our big ask was about the digital hours we commission – we're mainly talking entertainment content – because the audience is moving to our streaming platforms but those digital commissions are not counted towards our quotas. Going forwards, they will, which is huge. We also felt strongly felt we should be incentivized to better reflect the changing population in Canada and regulation was put in place for us to do that through expenditure requirements.

But if people reject a regulatory decision in Canada, they have the right to petition the cabinet and there were significant objections from independent producers, the guilds and other stakeholders. They questioned whether the lighter regulatory regime would cause us to stray from our license, so it went back to the CRTC, but what they didn't do is ask CRTC to reconsider the whole framework. The commission will look to see if they want to put more suspenders and buckles on us, but I'm hopeful we'll get a good response. We know we can't just expect trust.

**DEADLINE: *What's the situation like in Australia?***

**DA:** The indie sector relies on the ABC because we exceed all the others put together. We have statutory independence and no quotas, which is a bone of contention, but we do voluntary reports on where we spend and what other money we leverage from other places such as co-productions. Our argument is that we can't be the only part of a sustainable production economy. There needs to be some regulatory reform that helps.

**DEADLINE: *Local reports in Australia suggest ABC is going to move to a genre-based commissioning structure similar to CBC or the BBC. What can you say about that reform.***

**DA:** I haven't spoken about that publicly yet, and it was a leak, but I do think any organization should be evolving. It's about how you organize yourselves to make the best decisions possible. Public service broadcasting is too important, whatever the genre. It needs to be set up to make sense.

**DEADLINE: *How can you work together to better compete with the streamers?***

**PT:** TVNZ has successful partnerships in place with the BBC and is currently shooting *The Flood* with RTÉ [as [Deadline revealed](#) in September]. The merger with RNZ could benefit that further and we're going to want to collaborate.

**CT:** These co-productions are not a slam dunk but there are pockets of programming such as kids and factual where you can find success. Drama is always going to be tougher. The streamers, to give credit, have helped re-train audiences to listen to

**DEADLINE: Financially, global streamers are attracting the biggest talent. How do you ensure you can work with big-name talent that really sells your programs?**

**CT:** One of our great Canadian filmmakers is Richie Mehta and when I saw *Dehli Crime* on Netflix a little part of my heart broke that it wasn't on CBC. Having worked in the creative business my entire career, it's a wonderful thing that writers and directors are breaking through in a way they never had before. It's a renaissance of the auteur-driven storytelling that we hadn't seen for 10 or 15 years. We can celebrate that, but you are right: it is tough on us. We don't want to be door number four. We want to be door number one. We believe our competitive advantage is risk taking, creative freedom and ownership of rights.

**DA:** I'm so thrilled for people who start at the ABC and then go on to other things — it's a source of pride we could provide the platforms and resources for them to build their careers. It's through the indie production sector that we see this happen and if you handle it right, they always come back and work with you again, maybe as mentors. That's been seen as our role editorially over the years, allowing people to take risks to shine. The talent dips back in and out but we can't afford to warehouse talent. We're quite happy to have that role.

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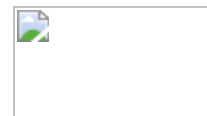
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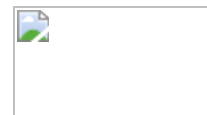
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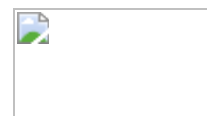
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