

Stan Grant urges ABC to show more Aboriginal success stories



Stan Grant on the set on his new program, *The Link*. Picture: John Feder

- *The Australian*
- 6 March 2017
- Stephen Fitzpatrick

The ABC must work harder to convince audiences it's more than just a city-focused, elite-driven organisation, and it should show more stories of indigenous success, not disadvantage, broadcaster Stan Grant says.

Grant said while developing his new half-hour magazine-style program *The Link* he was repeatedly struck by people who had the impression that "being from the ABC and being from the city, and probably more being from the ABC actually" he would not be interested in people's lived experience.

Grant admitted that even his own parents often avoided watching the national broadcaster "because they often feel the conversation is carried out in a way that is disconnected from their lives, often not talking about the things that are important to them". "My mother will say, 'oh the ABC, that's for toffs'," he said. "I think that at the ABC we need to reflect on that. If they don't think that they can watch this program or watch the ABC and get something out of it then I think we're doing something wrong."

Most people wanted to have "a very different conversation than the one I hear on air", Grant said, which was often "carried out at 30,000 feet with politicians, with heads of industry" and consisted of a "politician trying to blame another politician (or) journalist trying to catch politician out".

He said it wasn't a case of Australians being uninterested in major issues but, rather, being turned off by the ways the issues were being addressed. "These are people who are just out there living their lives and not following the bouncing ball of news like we all do when we work in it, but whose lives are directly affected by it," he said. "There are things people are grappling with every single day, and the conversation needs to be inclusive and welcoming, and it needs to be more expansive and a lot less - judgmental."

The Walkley Award winner, who was most recently at SBS's indigenous network NITV and at The Guardian, also has a long and successful career as a foreign correspondent. He began his career at the ABC three decades ago and was reappointed there last October in dual roles, as indigenous affairs editor and host of *The Link*, in the Friday 7.30 slot previously occupied by *Stateline*.

He did a widely admired job filling in for Leigh Sales on 7.30 over the summer.

With major organisational changes about to be introduced by managing director Michelle Guthrie, Grant said his relatively brief time back at the broadcaster meant he "wouldn't have a clue what needs to happen at a managerial or a structural level".

However, he said his chief goal was to make sure "the work that I do there ... starts to speak to the bulk of the population who pay their taxes to keep us on air" and said his own experience of growing up "Aboriginal, but also very working class" in the bush informed his view of needing to go beyond inner-city elite voices.

Grant also backed Noel Pearson's recent attack on the "soft bigotry of low expectations" in ABC coverage of indigenous Australia, saying it was "important to provide a different context, a bit more nuance, to try to represent the diversity of the (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) community".

"We look at Aboriginal people and issues through an intensely political lens, but there are many Aboriginal people just getting on with their lives," he said. "They're not out there protesting and burning flags. They're not out there demanding treaty or recognition. These things might be important to them, but I tell you what's equally if not more important right now is getting a job, having a house, getting your kids an education, building the things everyone else does.

"I'm much more interested in trying to represent that, and trying to bring a lot of that into the coverage, and I think that's been missing, and I think that's part of what Noel was talking about."

He said the ABC was becoming "a lot more aware ... that it's no good just presenting an endless tale of woe with no sign of any improvement ... but to present solutions, people who really are making a difference.

"That doesn't mean you've got to have a pollyanna view of the world; it doesn't mean you shy away from the other stuff, but it's important to be able to reflect the full diversity and range of the Aboriginal population and I don't think the media's ever really properly grappled with that."

He said the tendency to regard indigenous Australians as somehow homogenous meant solutions to disadvantage often were elusive. "You can't say that what happens in a really remote, deeply isolated and impoverished community is the same as what

happens to an Aboriginal kid growing up in Glebe, or in the suburbs of Melbourne or Adelaide,” he said. “An Aboriginal kid going to a private school on a scholarship is going to have a very different experience, is going to see the world differently, to an Aboriginal kid living in Yuendumu.

“If we homogenise this, and imagine that everyone is coming out of the same circumstances and is affected the same, then we obscure what is actually needed to make a difference.”