

Submission on
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment
(Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017

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Introduction:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017. I am pleased to see that there is a move within the Parliament to restore the ABC Shortwave transmissions that were terminated at very short notice by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter referred to as 'the Corporation' or 'the ABC').

It seems to me that the Corporation has possibly strayed from its Charter which requires it to "provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard." While not specified, "comprehensive" could relate to both the nature of the program material and the extent of broadcast coverage. There is an expectation that the Corporation has an obligation to serve ALL Australians. The Charter also requires the Corporation "to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs...."

On 11 December 2016, well ahead of the planned closure of the shortwave services, I wrote to both to the Managing Director and Chairman of the ABC Board concerning the planned closure of the Shortwave Services and asking them to reconsider their decision or at least delay it. I also offered a couple of alternative options which the Board could consider that might reduce cost. I received a response on 3 March from ABC Corporate Affairs on behalf of the Chairman of the Board, but I did not find the reasons given for the closure of the shortwave services at all compelling. The major justification for closing the shortwave services seems to have been that "Under the ABC Act, the ABC Board has an obligation to ensure that 'the functions of the Corporation are performed efficiently and to the maximum benefit to the people of Australia'. Within these parameters and operating with a fixed budget, the Board must make continual assessments about the appropriate allocation of funds." It seems clear to me that the Board had made its decision well before the public announcement and has no intention to reverse it, unless it is directed to do so or is compelled to do so by the planned legislation.

I support the proposed Bill requiring the ABC to restore domestic and international shortwave services.

Background:

Domestic Shortwave Services: Between 1939-1949 the Australian Broadcasting Commission, as it then was, established the Inland Shortwave Radio Service for the 5% of the population not adequately served by medium wave stations. Shortwave services continued to be broadcast from VLW Perth and VLM and VLQ at Bald Hills, Queensland through until at least 1992. In 1986, three High Power 50kW HF (High Frequency / Shortwave) "Shower Services" were established near Alice Springs (VL8A), Tennant Creek (VL8T) and Katherine (VL8K) to provide wide-area coverage to the Northern Territory. These transmissions also provided secondary reception outside of the Territory to parts of Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia as well as sailors and others working in the Arafura Sea.

The HF Inland Services were terminated abruptly and with little notice by the ABC at the end of January 2017. The closure of the HF Inland Services in the Northern Territory has resulted in a reduction in radio coverage for listeners in remote areas.

A question that needs to be asked is “Why were these services introduced in the first place?” The answer is that these services were established to provide a cost-effective broadcasting service to remote areas of Australia that cannot be achieved by any other means. The shortwave services at Perth and Bald Hills were closed as additional radio services expanded in Western Australia and Queensland. However, the three HF shower services in the Northern Territory continued to provide valuable coverage to the Northern Territory as well as remote areas of South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland where no other radio services were available. While satellite reception has been available for many years, the HF radio services provide a valuable service to mobile travellers which cannot utilise satellite reception.

International Shortwave Services: Originally established as “Australia Calling”, Australia has had an international voice via shortwave broadcasting since December 1939. Over the years international services have been cut back with shortwave services at Lyndhurst, Carnarvon, Cox Peninsula and Brandon being progressively closed. The shortwave transmissions at Shepparton, Victoria, were retained to provide a service to Asia and the Pacific. Eventually, the number of transmitters was reduced from 7 to 3. In January 2017 Australia’s ‘international voice’ transmitted via Radio Australia’s shortwave transmissions ceased with less than 2 months’ notice. This represents a major contraction in coverage and reach of Australia’s broadcasting services, especially to the people of the Pacific who have been reliant on shortwave services from Radio Australia, particularly during the cyclone season. In my opinion, the sudden closure of Radio Australia’s shortwave transmissions could represent an abrogation of the ABC’s responsibilities under the ABC Charter.

Justification for Closure of ABC Shortwave Services

The ABC’s justification for the closure of both the domestic and international shortwave services seems to be that *“Under the ABC Act, the ABC Board has an obligation to ensure that “the functions of the Corporation are performed efficiently and to the maximum benefit to the people of Australia”. Within those parameters and operating with a fixed budget, the Board must make continual assessments about the appropriate allocation of funds.”* The ABC also cites *“The ABC’s closure of the Radio Australia shortwave transmissions is aligned with other international broadcasters such as NHK (Japan), Radio Netherlands, Deutsche Welle (Voice of Germany), BBC World Service and Radio Canada International, who have all either reduced or terminated international shortwave services in recent years, citing an increase in satellite, online and FM listening and a decrease in shortwave listenership.”*

While all of this is true, this is not in my opinion sufficient justification for closure of Australia’s domestic and international services. Firstly, it appears that the savings from the closure of the shortwave services have been allocated to the provision of additional digital

radio broadcasting services for Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart. Here the ABC is essentially taking away something from those who have little (those in regional and rural Australia or in poorer Pacific Island countries) and giving to those that have much (those that live in cities with a multitude of radio services). Further justification for the closure of shortwave services can be found at <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/>

The reality is that while the technology may be old, it works. The technology is no older than that for medium wave transmissions which the Corporation has sought to retain. The main justification for closure is that it is the ABC's view that only a few people will be affected. By contrast to shortwave broadcasting, FM transmitters have extremely limited coverage and internet coverage is not available in many rural areas and is certainly unavailable to most Pacific Islanders who live in rural communities outside the reach of FM transmitters and without internet access.

Consideration of the Bill:

In the normal course of events, this Bill should not be necessary. As I see it, the ABC should continue with shortwave broadcasting in order to meet the requirements of its Charter. However, if the passage of this Bill is the only instrument that will restore the ABC's shortwave transmissions, so that people in remote areas in Australia and throughout the Pacific can obtain adequate reception, then I am in favour of it.

Domestic shortwave transmissions

Clause 1(a) I have no problems with this clause. The requirement to maintain previous coverage makes complete sense.

Clause 1(b) I find the requirement of this clause a bit limiting. For many people in remote areas, this may be the only radio service that they may have access to. Under Section 6 (1) of the Act the Charter requires the ABC to:

“(i) broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain; and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and (ii) broadcasting programs of an educational nature.”

In order to reflect cultural diversity, there could be an obligation for the Corporation to provide blended programming of predominantly Local Radio supplement by program material from other networks such as Radio National. Ideally, the program content should meet, as much as possible, the wishes and needs of the remote communities. The programming requirements for the Domestic Shortwave Services could be linked to the requirements being sought under the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015.

International Shortwave Transmissions

General: This part of the Bill requires that “the Corporation must maintain an international shortwave radio transmission service for Papua New Guinea and parts of the Pacific”. This is a bit ‘open’ as the Pacific is a very wide area and, apart from the requirement to serve Papua New Guinea, the Bill does not specify which parts of the Pacific *must* be served. Traditionally, Australia would identify with PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. However, Radio Australia has provided a service to the Pacific generally.

A recent petition to retain the Radio Australia shortwave service includes listeners as far away as the Cook Islands and Kiribati. Furthermore, the islands of Kiribati are spread over an enormous area and shortwave transmissions are the only practical way of serving these peoples. These islanders, particularly those on low-lying atolls, are subject to the early effects of climate change and are reliant on information regarding cyclone activities.

I will provide separately a copy of the comments from the petition which is available in the public domain at https://www.change.org/p/abc-chair-hon-james-spigelman-save-lifesaving-shortwave-radio-to-the-pacific/w?source_location=petition_show which may be of interest to the Committee.

The ABC does not own its transmission sites – these are owned by a private transmission provider. It is important that the Committee note that the shortwave transmission sites were specifically constructed to provide a dedicated service and that if the facilities are dismantled, then it would be prohibitively expensive to restore shortwave transmissions. On the other hand, the service provider will most likely have transmission equipment lying idle and not bringing in any revenue. There could be an opportunity for the ABC to secure shortwave transmission services from the previous transmission provider at a reasonable price. Other alternatives are possible, and I have advised the ABC of these.

The Shepparton site used to have 6 active transmitters (and 1 spare) but only 3 transmitters were in active use in more recent years. Traditionally, the PX Group (Pacific Group) of antennas at Shepparton were used to serve the Pacific using 100kW transmitters. The PX Group antennas were specifically designed to cover a number of different arcs from the eastern Pacific (Cook Islands, Tonga) through to the central (Fiji) and western Pacific (Solomon Islands). The old J-Group antennas were used to beam transmissions to PNG, Solomons and towards Japan. In addition, two 10kW transmitters at Brandon, near Townsville, were used in conjunction with fixed antennas - one transmission beamed north to Papua New Guinea and another to the east serving New Caledonia, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The Brandon facilities have been closed for a number of years, but I understand the transmission facilities are still intact.

It may therefore be necessary to consider what areas of the Pacific needs to be served by Australia’s ‘International Voice’ and whether the Bill needs to be more specific. It is my view that Australia should retain its ‘International Voice’ – if Australia is not interested in serving the Pacific I can assure you that the Peoples Republic of China most certainly is. China Radio International provides strong signals into Canberra and the Pacific and has very subtle ‘soft-sell’ programming.

Apart from the requirements of standard broadcasting, it is my view that there is a strategic need to retain Australia's international shortwave services. The transmission facilities at Shepparton are ideally suited to transmit to the Pacific and, if required or necessary, towards Asia. In the past, in an emergency, the Shepparton facilities have been used to provide coverage to central and northern Australia. This site has a great deal of flexibility from a coverage perspective and could possibly be used to serve both the Northern Territory and the Pacific.

Clause 1 (a) The requirement to have a minimum of three transmitters is sound, but the wording could be ambiguous. 3 transmitters could mean 2 active transmitters and a spare or standby transmitter. The use of 3 active transmitters is useful, particularly as it is essential that correct frequencies are chosen to deliver the program to the desired target area(s). The frequencies need to be ramped up as the sun rises in order that the signal will propagate successfully and then lowered after local sunset. In recent years, the ABC seems to have lost the art of frequency selection with a single frequency being in use for hours on end. There is no point in having a shortwave transmitter operating on a frequency that will not propagate into the desired target area.

It would perhaps be better if this clause was reworded along the lines:

"1 (a) uses at least 3 active transmitters with appropriate frequencies chosen to optimize reception in the desired target area(s)."

I have no further comments to offer at this stage, except to reiterate the importance of Radio Australia's shortwave transmissions to our Pacific neighbours. They are especially dependent on them in times of emergency, including cyclone activity.

I thank the Committee for looking into this matter and would be happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

W D Fallow
Canberra
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