

## Labor Senators' Additional Comments

1.1 Labor Senators believe that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is one of Australia's most important public institutions. We believe the ABC plays a crucial role in adding to the diversity of news in our media landscape and providing an opportunity for Australian content to be shown and heard—both in Australia and overseas. The ABC also plays a vital role in providing news, public announcements and emergency messages.

1.2 Labor Senators affirm and advocate the independence of the ABC and understand the importance of safeguarding our national broadcaster from political interference. In Government, Labor implemented measures to protect the institutional independence of our public broadcasters and their governing boards.

1.3 Labor notes that in 2014, and in breach of an election promise, the Liberal-National Coalition imposed funding cuts on the ABC amounting to \$355 million over a five-year period.

1.4 Labor Senators note that, in this context, the Government commissioned the ABC and SBS Efficiency Study 'to identify potential savings from the many "back of house" functions of the public broadcasters' operations. This included administration, use of equipment, property and technologies'.<sup>1</sup> The study report identified the discontinuation of shortwave radio services as an area of potential savings,<sup>2</sup> among other things.

1.5 Labor Senators are concerned that Coalition budget cuts are putting pressure on the ABC to find efficiencies in ways that may undermine important service provision. It is our view that the ABC's decision to cease shortwave radio transmissions in the Northern Territory (NT) and the Pacific is an example of the national broadcaster having to make trade-offs as it is being stretched to deliver on its mandate to, among other things, provide both 'comprehensive broadcasting services'<sup>3</sup> and 'digital media services'<sup>4</sup> in a media landscape undergoing transformational change.

1.6 Labor Senators note that efficiencies were cited in the ABC's December 2016 announcement on shortwave cessation as follows:

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1 The Hon Malcolm Turnbull, 'ABC and SBS Efficiency Study—release of report', *Media release*, 1 December 2014.

2 Department of Communications, *ABC and SBS Efficiency Study: Draft Report*, April 2014, p. 91.

3 *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*, s 6(1)(a).

4 *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*, s 6(1)(ba).

Michael Mason, ABC's Director of Radio said, "While shortwave technology has served audiences well for many decades, it is now nearly a century old and serves a very limited audience. The ABC is seeking efficiencies and will instead service this audience through modern technology".<sup>5</sup>

1.7 Further, we note evidence from the Director of Regional at the ABC to the Committee's previous inquiry in to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015, earlier this year, who stated:

[T]he ABC must make clear-headed and rational decisions about the services it can provide within a finite budget envelope...[T]he ABC's recent decision regarding the Northern Territory short wave services...is a case in point.<sup>6</sup>

1.8 Labor Senators acknowledge the ABC's ongoing commitment to providing services to remote and regional Australia as well as in the Pacific, but are concerned that the ABC has ceased shortwave radio without sufficient regard to how appropriate digital technologies are for many living in rural and remote areas, given that digital technology is limited in rural and regional areas due to insufficient internet and mobile phone coverage. Satellite technology is unreliable during rain and heavy smoke, and some technologies require a fixed base station and power supply. In some areas there is no mobile reception or radio reception, which is highly concerning in emergency situations.

1.9 Labor has been campaigning on the ABC's decision to cease shortwave transmissions since it was announced in mid-December, and has had regular contact with the ABC and affected communities and stakeholders ever since. We believe that ongoing consultation is necessary to ensure that Australian policy goals are realised in Australia and the Pacific.

1.10 Labor has made representations to Government on its concerns about the cessation of shortwave radio. This includes Opposition Leader the Hon Bill Shorten writing to the Prime Minister in January 2017 asking him to step in and fund the ABC to continue the shortwave service in the NT, as well as the Hon Mark Dreyfus QC MP and Mr Stephen Jones MP writing to Communications Minister, Senator the Hon Mitch Fifield, requesting that the Minister work with ABC management to ensure the ABC can support continued provision of the shortwave radio service in the NT.

1.11 Despite Labor's direct representations, and the valid concerns of the many people who rely on shortwave radio, the Government has failed to act.

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5 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'ABC Exits Shortwave Radio Transmission', *Media Release*, 6 December 2016.

6 Mrs Fiona Reynolds, Director of Regional, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Committee Hansard*, 6 March 2017, p. 33.

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1.12 While Labor Senators are sympathetic to the concerns that prompted the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017, we have reservations about the bill for the following additional reasons.

1.13 Firstly, the bill does nothing to address the real issue of ABC budget pressures, brought about by Liberal-National Coalition funding cuts, which mean the ABC is being spread too thinly, being asked to do too much with too little and being forced into making 'efficiencies' that undermine its ability to serve both the spirit and the letter of the ABC Charter.

1.14 Secondly, mandating or prescribing technology choice for the delivery of broadcasting services in legislation goes against the long-standing technology-neutral stance adopted for broadcasting regulation,<sup>7</sup> as embodied in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (Cth), which creates the category of 'national broadcasting services'.<sup>8</sup>

1.15 Labor Senators are of the view that the measures proposed in this bill are not an appropriate way to address the concerns about the cessation of the ABC's shortwave services and we wish to reiterate Labor's calls on Government to work with the ABC to explore options for reinstating shortwave radio.

**Senator Anne Urquhart**  
**Senator for Tasmania**

**Senator Anthony Chisholm**  
**Senator for Queensland**

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7 Explanatory Memorandum, Broadcasting Services Bill 1992.

8 *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (Cth), ss 11 and 13.

