



**PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS,
TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS**

Tabling statement

24 September 2001

Local Voices: an inquiry into regional radio

As with many of the simple things in life, radio is a service that many of us take for granted. With an average of 5 radios per Australian household, radio has a pervasive and important presence in our lives.

Radio is affordable, accessible and portable. It has qualities of intimacy and immediacy that other forms of media find hard to match.

Radio services have been subjected to a number of regulatory, economic and technological developments in recent years affecting the range and quality of radio services for listeners in many parts of Australia. They have unquestionably transformed the environment in which service providers operate.

That said, the main thrust of the inquiry was the impact on regional areas.

Some of the changes have been beneficial. For instance, the number of radio services has increased in nearly all licence areas in Australia — in some areas, substantially so.

There is a flipside: not all areas have benefited from the developments. Some communities in Australia have very limited access to any radio service at all, let alone a choice! Given the technological developments that have occurred in broadcasting, the Committee find this completely unacceptable.

All communities should have access to their ABC Local Radio service and at least one local commercial service.

To this end we have recommended that a Radio Black Spots Program be established (similar to the Television Black Spots Program). The program should apply to national and commercial radio services.

The impact of networking was a major focus of the inquiry.

We are concerned that this is leading to fewer local voices —the voices which are the very essence of regional radio. There are sufficient examples for us to be convinced that warning bells are ringing for local radio in regional areas.

Audiences deserve at least to know where the voices they are listening to are coming from; ie whether a program is 'live and local'— or live but broadcast from another centre — or pre-recorded, networked or syndicated. Accordingly, we have recommended that all non-metropolitan radio services should be required to identify the originating source of programming when giving their call sign.

Ultimately the community should be the judge of whether it is satisfied with the radio services it is receiving. We have recommended that the ABA undertake a rigorous and systematic audit of the licence areas to establish the degree to which listeners are being provided with an adequate and comprehensive service.

This information must be part of future licence planning. In some instances, the audits may trigger the allocation of another commercial licence for the area. The audits may also reveal the need for more stringent requirements on broadcasters.

Attending to the needs of broadcasters, we accept that commercial radio services will only be provided if they are commercially viable. The number of licences is part of this equation.

We have recommended that a test of commercial viability be restored to the BSA. We have also recommended that after the current LAP process has been completed, no new commercial licences should be issued in an area until the audits of the relevant licence area has been completed.

Radio spectrum access carries with it responsibilities.

We demand that radio's responsibilities be met in times of flood, fire, storm, cyclone or other emergencies or threatened emergencies. There is no room for poor performance. Radio's responsibility does not cease when programming is being delivered in pre-recorded or networked mode. We have made a number of recommendations in this area including the recommendation that all radio broadcasters be required to broadcast any announcement considered necessary by an accredited emergency services organisation.

This inquiry has generated substantial interest with 290 submissions. We have travelled extensively and held 18 public hearings and public meetings in a wide range of locations (including Tamworth, Geraldton, Townsville, Bathurst, Longreach and Darwin) and heard from over 160 witnesses.

In our view, the current industry/listener dichotomy does not provide for balance. Our report calls for balance through 20 recommendations covering national, commercial and community radio sectors.