



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA • THE SENATE

SENATOR BRIDGET MCKENZIE  
*Senator for Victoria*

Mr Justin Milne  
Chairman  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation  
GPO Box 9994  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Committee: *SENATE ENVIRONMENT  
AND COMMUNICATIONS*

**Tabled Document**

Inquiry: *SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES*

Date: *24 OCTOBER 2017*

Witness: *SENATOR BRIDGET MCKENZIE*

Organisation: .....

2 August 2017

Dear Mr Milne

I write in relation to the Board's decision in December 2016 to terminate the ABC's shortwave transmission service into the Northern Territory and other parts of Australia, as well as areas of the Pacific.

Since its enactment on 31 January this year, the decision has prompted a wave of complaints to my office detailing its impact on the lives of those in affected areas, the inadequacy of purported alternatives, and potential safety ramifications stemming from the ABC's role as an emergency services broadcaster.

Where transmissions to the Pacific are concerned, the decision is also an abrogation of the ABC's obligations under Section 1, Clause (b) of its Charter, which requires it, in part, 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; and*
- (ii) enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs.*

In seeking to comprehend this decision I have encountered wilful frustration including, but not limited to:

- The trenchant refusal by ABC office bearers to satisfactorily answer questions on notice at Senate Budget Estimates hearings or, indeed, to offer any meaningful information at all;
- Refusal to provide redacted documents ostensibly substantiating a claim “less than 500 people” were affected, but on notice said to be “outside the scope of the shortwave issue;”
- A lack of relevant information apparently relied upon by the Board, evidenced in testimony to the inquiry into the ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015 regarding “replacement” technologies including
  - FM radio, affected by adverse weather events;
  - mobile telephony, governed by signal coverage;
  - Satellite telephony, which does not receive radio signals, and which is too expensive and slow for internet radio streaming;
  - Viewer Access Satellite Television: unsuitable for mobile users such as travellers, truck drivers and fisherman, and affected by topography and bad weather; and
  - the limited reach of AM and FM, whilst shortwave covers vast areas with each broadcast;
- Perversely, the further admission that the ABC did not consult the Northern Territory government at any stage despite the likely impact of withdrawing shortwave services on remote NT residents.

The decision excludes unknown numbers of ABC consumers from public broadcasts, and injects unreliability into the ABC’s capacity as an emergency broadcaster. It suggests at best a fundamental misunderstanding of rural and regional Australia, or at worst summary dismissal of these areas and the people in them.

By arbitrarily withdrawing shortwave services, it is also clear the ABC Board has exhibited a blatant disregard for those in the Pacific who have relied upon and/or enjoy the material previously broadcast.

Representatives from the ABC were asked to provide on notice details of Board deliberations to enable a determination to be made as to whether the Board took all reasonable steps to adequately and properly inform itself when making the decision to terminate shortwave services. They have refused to do so.

The ABC's obfuscation, during two Senate inquiries and at Estimates hearings, seems contrived to defend the absurd proposition that fewer than 500 people are affected: a contention quantified only by dubious surveys (also not provided to the Senate when demanded), and which in any case was effectively debunked by testimony stating 2% of the Papua New Guinea population used ABC shortwave, and that listeners from as far afield as Fiji, India, Laos, the USA and France have complained about the termination of the service.

In the final analysis, the ABC Charter is important. I wish to know how the ABC proposes to meet its obligations, in regional Australia and internationally, given the defective alternatives to shortwave it seems determined to persist with.

Please advise the basis for any belief the decision is consistent with ABC Charter obligations and how, in view of the lack of evidence underpinning it – compounded by the evasiveness shown at recent Senate inquiries and Estimates hearings – you believe those obligations are being met.

Yours sincerely

Bridget McKenzie

The Nationals Senator for Victoria

24 August 2017



**ABC**  
Australian  
Broadcasting  
Corporation

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. Gray'.

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Dear Senator McKenzie

The Chairman has asked me to respond to your letter of 2 August 2017 concerning the termination of the ABC's remaining shortwave services.

In relation to the international shortwave service, the ABC's Charter is clear on the Corporation's obligation to transmit news and other content beyond our borders. However, it leaves the means of transmission to management and the ABC Board, as is appropriate.

On the broader shortwave issue, the ABC Board, of which I am a member, stands by its decision in late 2016. With a fixed funding envelope, the Board must always consider competing needs and how best to meet its obligations. In making its decision, the Board was cognisant of its overriding duty to "ensure that the functions of the Corporation are performed efficiently and with the maximum benefit to the people of Australia".

The ABC is aware of its accountability obligations. In all parliamentary proceedings, ABC employees have acted professionally and in the public interest.

It appears that your letter has been overtaken by parliamentary developments. On 9 August 2017, the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee released its report into the *ABC Amendment (Restoring Shortwave) Bill 2017*. The Committee's majority recommendation was to not support the Bill, judging that it would impinge on the independence of the ABC and lead to increased costs. The Committee stated:

*"it is not convinced that dictating the broadcaster's choice of technology is in line with the established tradition and understanding of independence that has been fostered over many decades. The ABC has made the decision to terminate its shortwave broadcasts, and is seeking a modern and efficient way forward for the dissemination of content, which are legitimate activities for the broadcaster to undertake."*

The ABC Board obviously concurs with this conclusion and the assertion of the overriding importance of the Corporation's independence in making these decisions.

I absolutely refute your claim that the ABC is ignoring its rural and regional audiences. To the contrary, the ABC is committed to serving the one-third of Australians who live outside the capital cities and this commitment is recognised by those communities.



Approximately one third of the ABC's budget is invested in programs and services for regional and rural Australia. Additional to this, in March 2017 the ABC announced the *Connecting Communities* initiative, its biggest investment in regional and remote Australia, with an injection of \$15 million a year and the creation of 80 new content-making jobs.

The ABC is also reinvigorating its international strategy, recognising that changing audience trends require new approaches to serving the three biggest markets: Asia, the Pacific and expatriates. More detail will be provided over coming months.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Guthrie  
Managing Director