

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017.

Introduction

My submission is in SUPPORT of the Senator Nick Xenophon Bill, to restore the essential ABC Short Wave services, to the Outback of Australia, Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Island Nations. I have also signed the on line petition, “*Save lifesaving shortwave radio to the Pacific*” at the following web site:-

<https://www.change.org/p/abc-chair-hon-james-spigelman-save-lifesaving-shortwave-radio-to-the-pacific>

Who Am I – Experience

Now semi-retired, I have spent more than half my working career in Papua New Guinea, and often return to provide assistance. I have extensive telecommunications management and engineering experience, in both Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). From Executive Manager responsible for the Telikom PNG Public Switched Telecommunications Network (PSTN), to Operations Manager SunNET; the Queensland State Government Telecommunications Network. In 2001 I completed a two-year AusAID project, to provide support and assistance in developing Telecommunications Regulatory Policy for GoPNG, one of the most important outputs was the *Policy on Remote Rural Communications*.

In my early days in PNG I helped maintain the telecommunications network and radio broadcast services including the studios. Transmission was almost exclusively Short Wave radio, even the trunk telephone network between major centres was Short Wave, except Port Moresby to Lae and Madang, they were VHF trunks. Later, I helped maintain the microwave trunk network and build the progressive upgrades; from there I progressed to engineering management, daily operations and later network management.

Submission

The PNG shortwave broadcast service remains to this day and only last year a new studio was installed at Buka on Bougainville Island, together with a 10KW Short Wave transmitter. Short Wave is still the only cost effective method of covering 100% of the population in PNG, the majority of whom live in very remote areas and because of the incredible mountainous terrain, cannot possibly be covered by a VHF broadcast service. Certainly, given a great deal of money, anywhere in the world can have a satellite service, but the grass roots people of PNG do not have money. But they do have battery powered Short Wave receivers and replacement batteries can easily be purchased at the local Trade Store.

This brings me to the *Radio Australia* Short Wave service, from my experience I know there was a very wide audience in remote areas of Papua New Guinea (including me); there is no doubt it brought considerable prestige to Australia. News and current affairs were ‘trusted’ and for entertainment purposes *Radio Australia* was widely enjoyed, in their day the PNG

Tok Pidgin programs had a huge following. In addition, *Radio Australia* had a large audience in our other Pacific Island neighbours such as the Solomon's, Vanuatu and Fiji, particularly those communities scattered on remote islands. For them natural disasters are common, an early warning of a Tsunami can save countless lives, but unfortunately the means of providing that alert has now gone. We (I am a proud Australian) have spent over the year's mega millions, designated Aid to Pacific Nations, in particular Papua New Guinea. The \$ savings made by the ABC in closing the Short Wave services, pale into insignificance compared to the public money we have already invested in PNG and the Pacific. Could Australia not consider the provision of Short Wave Services a small portion of overseas aid; the benefits generated in *good will* alone are incalculable and I would have thought a Pacific radio emergency warning service essential! At the end of the day we are not talking about a great fortune, surely Australia can afford it, can we afford not to?

To date I have not seen any submissions to support the Bill from the rural sector or grass roots people of PNG or Pacific Nations. So why might that be, simply because they do not have access to Internet as we do in Australia. There is a postal service, but that could involve several days walk to a Post Office. In just so many places the link with the outside world is Short Wave radio. Will *Radio Australia* be missed, you bet, will you hear the people express disappointment and dissatisfaction, alas almost certainly not.

Likewise, Short Wave broadcast to the Australian outback was an important service; others have provided examples as to why a satellite service is not cost effective or in many cases even a practical solution, such as a small boat or vehicle. ABC management claim that Short Wave technology is "old and obsolete", but until there is a cost effective practical replacement, that is simply not true. The wheel is one of mankind's oldest technologies, but who in their right mind would declare it obsolete, nothing has bettered it yet and that is the case with Short Wave radio!

During the 2015 Pacific Games held in Port Moresby, a satellite programme feed from the National Broadcasting Corporation of Papua New Guinea was re-broadcast by an ABC Shortwave transmitter in Townville, to effectively relay the Pacific Games programs across the Pacific. Apparently reception was excellent and enabled people in many remote areas to closely follow their sporting heroes, in events they would not otherwise have been able to follow. No other technology could possibly have had such an effective coverage of PNG and the Pacific Nations, agreed satellite can, however I emphasis the audience in a developing country cannot afford such technology. Full marks to whoever organised the program relay, it was a fairly simple exercise to fire up a retired short wave transmitter and arrange a program feed from Port Moresby. It proved beyond doubt; there still is a need for Short Wave radio services in the Pacific. This temporary service certainly delivered the ABC many listener "*Brownie points*", but the more recent and arbitrary closure of the *Radio Australia* Short Wave service would certainly have trashed that.

It is great to tune into *Radio Australia* on a car radio in Port Moresby or Lae, perhaps in the future other main centres will also be covered. But even if all the main cities and towns are catered for, VHF radio cannot reach the majority of the population who live in the Highlands

or out on the remote islands; a VHF signal cannot penetrate rock or bend round it, or for that matter cross vast expanses of ocean. A short drive out of Port Moresby or Lae and the *Radio Australia* VHF signal is gone.

In conclusion, it beggars belief that the ABC could close down such a valuable working service and it seems without much (if any) public consultation. I am therefore very grateful that Senator Nick Xenophon has acknowledged the demise of the Short Wave service, and also recognised its importance. I sincerely hope the Bill will be successful, I trust it will receive wide support and will not become buried in partisan politics.

If you require any further information, my registration includes an e-mail address, telephone number and I would be very pleased to hear from any interested party.