

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017 was introduced by Senator Nick Xenophon on 13 February 2017.¹

1.2 On 16 February 2017, the Senate referred the bill to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report by 10 May 2017.² This was later extended to 9 August 2017.³

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 In accordance with its usual practice, the committee advertised the inquiry on its website and wrote to relevant individuals and organisations inviting submissions. The date for receipt of submissions was 5 May 2017. The committee received 59 submissions, which are listed at Appendix 1. The public submissions are available on the committee's website at [www.aph.gov.au/senate ec](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate_ec).

1.4 The committee held a hearing in Canberra on 16 June 2017. A list of witnesses is at Appendix 2.

1.5 The committee thanks all of the individuals and organisations that contributed to the inquiry.

Purpose of the bill

1.6 The bill proposes to amend the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* (ABC Act) to require the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to restore its shortwave transmission services. The ABC ceased shortwave transmission services in the Northern Territory and to international audiences from 31 January 2017.

1.7 The bill proposes to insert a new section—section 27A—in the ABC Act. Proposed subsection 27A(1) will require the ABC to maintain three domestic shortwave transmission services providing wide area coverage across the Northern Territory which will broadcast the proximate local radio service. The proposed subsection will also require the ABC to maintain at least three domestic shortwave transmission services which were operating up until the cessation of the domestic shortwave transmission on 31 January 2017.

1 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 27, 13 February 2017, p. 914.

2 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 30, 16 February 2017, p. 992.

3 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 39, 9 May 2017, p. 1305.

1.8 Proposed subsection 27A(2) requires the ABC to maintain an international shortwave transmission service for Papua New Guinea and parts of the Pacific which will use at least three transmitters and broadcast the ABC's international service. The proposed subsection also requires the ABC to broadcast in the relevant language of the population that it is broadcasting to. The Explanatory Memorandum stated that this clause ensures that people in those regions have access to important news, weather and emergency information.⁴

Scrutiny of bills committee

1.9 When examining a bill or draft bill, the committee takes into account any relevant comments published by the Senate Standing Committee for the Scrutiny of Bills (the Scrutiny of Bills Committee). The Scrutiny of Bills Committee assesses legislative proposals against a set of accountability standards that focus on the effect of proposed legislation on individual rights, liberties and obligations, and on parliamentary propriety.

1.10 In its third Scrutiny Digest, the Scrutiny of Bills Committee stated it had no comment on the bill.⁵

Structure of the report

1.11 This first chapter sets out the background to the inquiry. Chapter 2 discusses the issues raised in evidence and the committee's views and recommendations.

ABC shortwave services

1.12 Shortwave radio (or high-frequency AM) uses broadcast frequencies from 1.6 to 30 megahertz. Shortwave radio has major advantages for long distance communication as it utilises 'sky-wave or skip propagation, in which the radio waves are reflected or refracted back to Earth from the ionosphere, allowing communication around the curve of the Earth'.⁶

1.13 The ABC has used shortwave transmission for both domestic and international radio services for many years. Radio Australia, for example, commenced its charter in 1939 as an overseas shortwave service, 'Australia Calling', run jointly by the ABC and the Department of Information. Radio Australia came under the sole control of the ABC in 1950. By the mid-1990s, Radio Australia broadcast in English

4 Explanatory Memorandum, [p. 3].

5 Scrutiny Digest 3/17, 22 March 2017, p. 1.

6 ABC, 'ABC Exits Shortwave Radio Transmission', 6 December 2016, <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> (accessed 10 May 2017).

and eight other languages to a wide audience throughout Asia, to Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Islands and Micronesia.⁷

1.14 From 1944, Radio Australia's transmission site was based in Shepparton. The 200 hectare site was home to seven transmitters of 100 kilowatt capacity.⁸ The transmitters continue to be owned and operated by Broadcast Australia International (BAI).⁹

1.15 Over the years, domestic shortwave ABC services utilised a number of transmitter sites including at Carnarvon in Western Australia and at Roe Creek, Tennant Creek and Katherine in the Northern Territory. The ABC ended its shortwave services in Western Australia and Queensland in the 1990s.¹⁰

1.16 In December 2016, the ABC announced that it would end its shortwave transmission service in the Northern Territory and to international audiences from 31 January 2017,¹¹ and that savings from this measure would contribute to implementing a renewed digital strategy which would result in increased digital radio coverage in Darwin, Hobart and Canberra.¹²

1.17 During the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee's previous inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015,¹³ the committee also received evidence about the cessation of domestic shortwave services. Critics of the termination of the shortwave service contended that:

- the decision was the result of centralised decision-making;
- there was no consultation with users in the Northern Territory;

7 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *The Role and Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television*, May 1997, pp. 9–10.

8 ABC, 'Beaming Radio Australia around the world on shortwave', <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/beaming-radio-australia-around-the-world-on-shortwave/1094588>

9 ABC, *Submission 39*, p. 9.

10 Mr Michael Millett, Head, Government Relations, ABC, *Committee Hansard*, 16 June 2017, p. 17. See also Mr Darryl Fallow, *Submission 4*, pp. 1–2.

11 ABC, 'ABC Exits Shortwave Radio Transmission', 6 December 2016, <http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/shortwave-radio/> (accessed 10 May 2017).

12 Mr Michael Millett, Head, Government Relations, ABC, *Committee Hansard*, 16 June 2017, p. 21.

13 Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015*, April 2017. Available at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/ABC_Rural_Regional_Bill/Report.

- shortwave is highly important to remote communities, travellers and those working on the land and at sea in particular for weather and emergency information; and
- the Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) system is an inadequate substitute for shortwave as it is not suitable to use in vehicles, is unreliable in storms and is only effective close to the receiver.¹⁴

1.18 These issues have been raised again in evidence to the current inquiry, and are considered in Chapter 2.

Note on references

1.19 References to the committee Hansard transcript for the public hearing on 16 June 2017 are to the proof transcript. Page numbers may vary between proof and official Hansard transcripts.

14 Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015*, April 2017.