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Submission for Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

Introduction

The Australian Government via the ABC management shut down the Australian Interface with the Asia Pacific Region when it shut down RADIO AUSTRALIA – a long running shortwave radio service that had a wide listening audience because of its reputation of reliability and variety of news, weather and numerous subject items.

Further, response for the ABC consultation was discounted by the Head of the ABC when she decided to shut down the service due to the cuts in its budget by the Australian Government, Radio Australia was also listened to by a lot of Australians including but not exclusively Outback trucking operators, fishing boats, tourists travelling in rural and remote Australia, exploration parties and rural properties plus many others who enjoyed the programmes presented.

ASIA PACIFIC REGION

Firstly I will discuss the infrastructure of the 3 near Pacific neighbours e.g. PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. New Caledonia being a French territory was adequately covered by that countries radio service but I know of people from there that were listeners to Radio Australia.

Papua New Guinea

The radio services are mainly transmitted by the National Broadcasting Commission NBC and its history dated back to when Australia was administrator of the country.

There is a mix of AM, FM and SW services which are published as being available in various locations throughout the country BUT I have been reliably informed that there is ongoing issues with stations not being in operation, on reduced power or have faults. There are also the issues with the earthquake, floods and lawlessness causing damage to infrastructure. This effects coverage and most importantly national disaster advices being received by the

population both in the cities and remote areas. Access is always an issue at these times as airstrips and roads are damaged and there are deaths, injured people plus lack of food and potable water exactly as happens in Australia post cyclones, floods and bushfires and requires response.

PNG has a network of FM stations which give limited distance coverage and are situated in more populated areas but the signal is severely attenuated in mountainous surrounding terrain— as was discovered in French Polynesia when they switched off SW services and went to FM and a large percentage of the population in outlying areas could not receive the radio stations.

PNG has also some MW Radio Stations but , once again, there can be and are reception issues due to terrain, PNG is a very mountainous country with jungle clad slopes and valleys. These geographical features can cause attenuation of the transmitted radio signals plus in the monsoon season with its storms the lightning has a major detrimental effect both at the transmitter site and for persons wishing to listen. I believe that some are running on reduced power due to maintenance or other cost restraints.

The people in PNG can also access several SW frequencies via NBC e.g. mainly in the 3-4 MHz range and a frequency of 9675 KHz from Port Moresby. Hence if these particular frequencies are not operational due to radio band conditions, due to the Maximum Usable Frequencies, MUF, availability due to ionization of the D, E, F1 and F2 upper atmospheric bands the transmitted radio signals propagate into space.

Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands are presently recovering from the internal issues that saw Australia invited to send Defence Force and Police assets to assist the Solomon Island Government gain control over the rebellion plus give training to allow their Government to run its National Affairs and Criminal justice System better. This has led to a government working very hard to live within its means of monies received and very mindful of corruption.

This has led to the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Service SIBC having to effect budget constraints. Its SW Service on 5.020 MHz is now on reduced output power and reduced hours. It's MW Service on 1035 KHz and SW services are transmitted from Honiara. FM stations are located at Honiara, Gizo and Lata – these are providing relatively short range coverage for the local area.

Vanuatu

Radio Vanuatu operates mainly from Port Vila with Its SW frequencies of 3.945 KHz and 7.260 KHz and a MW frequency of 1125 KHz – these stations seem to be operating on lower power than previously and have the ongoing constraints of costs associated with spare parts

and the impacts from numerous cyclones over the last couple of decades. FM Stations operate from Port Vila, Santo and Tanna.

The effect of a cyclone impacting Port Vila means that there is an elevated probability of the Radio services being out of operation exactly at the time when they are really required to inform the country of what is occurring with provision of help with medical, food, housing and assessments on damage.

Deficiencies in these countries Radio services

I have seen the effects that disasters and weather passing close to populated and remote areas of our Pacific neighbours and it's not unusual for communities to simply be not contactable for weeks.

These countries don't have the frequency agility that Radio Australia had whereby a range of frequencies were available hence at any time one could access information. The simple fact is that it would be cost prohibitive for these countries to have this great attribute due to cost of multiple radio transmitters in operation simultaneously both in land required and actual antennas/ transmitters expenses.

It must be noted that it's usual for over 80 percent of the population of these countries to be "man bush" e.g. not living in the cities or towns. Hence the battery operated radio is their only source of information and the provision of mains power is not possible - due to isolation, being on an island or remotel village and alternative power sources are simply non affordable or available.

Pacific Leaders Support for Radio Australia

During the short time frame allowed for public comment on the ABC consultation of shutting down Radio Australia there was letters from Prime Ministers and Senior Ministers of the Pacific Countries supporting the continuance of the "Status Quo" with the provision of Radio Australia Services to the Asia Pacific Area and in particularly their countries. These Neighbouring Political leaders also fully explained the reason why Radio Australia was so important to them on an ongoing basis.

Their input was completely ignored by both the ABC and Australian Department Of Foreign Affairs and I did not see any comment by Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister - which, to me, and probably the effected countries showed a great deal of indifference and apathy or/and possibly ignorance.

ABC justification for Radio Australia shut down.

There can be no doubt that the head of the ABC were forced into a "no win" position by the reduction in funding provided by the Australian Government – which would have been decided at a Cabinet Meeting as is the usual procedure.

BUT after making the decision to shut down the ABC to then call for public submissions and then dismiss them as from a few radio people and others in Australia and completely ignoring the Heads of our near neighbouring countries I feel is just plain rude. I feel that an apology is overdue to the parties who sent in submissions.

The ABC comments “that the role has never been more crucial as geo-politics of the region becomes more dynamic” is just waffle and the fact is that a large number of the population, read formerly Radio Australia listeners, are now effectively disconnected from Australia.

Political Implications for Australia

The fact is that China has now stepped into the Short Wave vacuum caused by the cessation of Radio Australia. China has been working on extending its influence across the Asia Pacific region for some decades and the ABC, via the Australian Government’s actions in cutting funding, has given them a major foothold and ability to expand its PR into the region in one easy step!

The other classic statement by the ABC was that shortwave technology was out of date – so why are so many around the world listening to short wave radio transmissions? To put it simply it’s about coverage and giving information as well as amplifying a governments aims - as China is now doing.

In Asia I have talked to quite a lot of nationals from various countries and they had knowledge of Radio Australia and a lot listened. The numbers of listeners could not be reasonably quantified as surveys seldom take into account or have contact with folk in rural or remote areas or heavily populated areas of Asia – as obviously occurred in the initial ABC check prior to turning off Radio Australia or maybe they attempted a survey by internet – which is not used by all of Australians and a lot of the Asia Pacific peoples as was previously explained.

Justification for Radio Australia

I have travelled in the 3 countries covered by this submission and on numerous occasions I have been in remote villages and watched the people listening to the battery powered radio and the programmes on Radio Australia as well as their own local news, if available. They were learning English by listening and learning about the world. It was a major part of their time after work and was similar to what used to occur in Australia before the introduction of television when the Australian family used to sit around the radio and listen to the news and radio programmes.

The data cables that are proposed to Vanuatu and Solomon Islands will only benefit a few of those countries population. As previously explained the majority are living in villages outside the availability of either mains electricity or internet coverage and cannot afford computers

etc. or satellite services. Maybe the Foreign Affairs personal in the effected countries should spend time out in the regions and see how basic living is.

I sincerely hope that notice is taken of this submission as it's based upon my observations and facts.

Finally I ask that the parties involved in this review also remember the Australian Army. Navy and Air Force Personal who during world war 2 fought in these countries and also listened to Radio Australia on Radios that were provided by the Australian Government to boost morale.

I still believe that the Australian Government has "floundered" into shutting down a vital service to our near Neighbours and obviously had a shock wave hit it as China has now stepped into the vacuum Australia made for them. Its plainly obvious that what a lot of us "discounted Australians and Pacific Island Leaders " told the previous predetermined outcome consultation has now come to pass and be shown to be truthful and correct.

Mike Patterson

Not aligned with any organisation

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I have no objection to my submission being made public.

