



The supporters of Australian Broadcasting to the Pacific.

I write to express my disappointment at the demise of Radio Australia broadcasting to the Pacific.

I lived in a remote are of Fiji (Labasa and Dreketi) in the Northern division on the island of Vanua Levu., where I helped to set up a rural High school after teaching in Labasa College for 2 years. I then spent 4 years preparing village food production schemes in remote areas of Macuata and Bua provinces., including he Seqaqa sugar development.

I am able to communicate in the Fijian language and my wife has numerous family contacts in both Labasa, Suva and Lautoka. Her family has traditional chiefly ties. This has enabled me to get a local perspective at grass roots , and higher levels. It is interesting to go into the markets and listen to the local conversations in the local languages.

On a family visit in June last year, I was astounded when there was no Radio Australia coverage in Lautoka and only a faint FM signal on occasions , I think, originating from Nadi. (perhaps Denarau , where there is a small Australian community) The Chinese have moved into the vacuum left by Radio Australia, and their influence is everywhere.

On the day we left Suva, there was a large Chinese survey ship in the harbour. It had 5 or 6 high definition parabolic antennae, and was obviously a surveillance vessel. The taxi driver claimed that it had been there for a long period of time. I recall that a few months before that there was talk of Chinese surveillance of a joint Australian /US exercise in the Pacific.

We travelled to Labasa by ferry and passed through the village (Dreketi) where I worked between 1973 and 1978. What was once a road paved with river gravel is now a bitumen road with reticulated power from another village some 40 Km away, and a new harbour facility at Nabawalu following the recent cyclone. I have not checked this (and have no means of doing so,) but I was told it was put in with Chinese money in order to facilitate a Chinese Bauxite mine close to where we lived. I was told that not only were they taking the bauxite but also the top soil. There were several Chinese people at the market in Dreketi when the bus bulled up there. I can understand why the Fijian community is welcoming to the Chinese as the infrastructure is of huge benefit to the rural community. This did not happen with the Australian presence when I lived there. An enquiry to a close family member in Lautoka resulted in the claim that China had lent the Fiji Govt \$300 million for development and it was to be repaid in \$.u.s. Again I have no means of verifying this but the relative has a high profile position in the sugar industry, I also heard much the same story by listening in the market. This follows the pattern of Chinese aid in Veneswala where China bailed out the economy, but was to be repaid in oil. A similar pattern appears to be emerging in Africa., and one has to wonder what the driving motive is in the Pacific. I suspect fishing rights.

One of the projects I was mildly involved in while I lived there was the bridging road between Seqaqa and SavuSavu, on Vanua Levu This was extremely mountainous country and difficult. It is now a major highway, gain funded I believe from China. In several places there are plastic growing houses again promoted from China, and I suspect that produce from these may even go to China. When I worked there developments like this were British., or Australian in nature , and then the Cane development I worked on there post teaching was funded by the Asian Development Bank and partly by the Australian company CSR , but the only overseas presence

There now is Chinese, and so many of the settlements in that remote area and in other places had satellite receiving dishes and it appears, powered by solar.

Radio Australia could have played a major roll in promoting our interests , and possibly our security in so many areas, but is now a non entity, and no longer relevant. I was also told that Fiji nationals are in line for scholarships in China just as has happened in several African countries, but we seem to have become superfluous.. This used to happen with Australia , particularly with Military training and agriculture. This is particularly sad as my wife's nephew who is a Fiji trained Doctor now working in Brisbane, claimed that there are some 380 Fiji trained doctors working in Australia and roughly the same number of nurses. I know that here are a number of Fiji trained teacher here in Alice Springs. If we are to be the beneficiaries of their training in Fiji, it seems only fair that we should help with their education and promoting this , and our mutual interests and via radio is a first and obvious step, and in Australia's best interests.

It seems that the withdrawal of Radio Australia services has been based on the premise that Internet will be a better (and cheaper) method of communication. This is not true as in the remote areas this is simply not an option and very expensive when available. My phone needed to be unlocked and Telstra quoted \$80 on line in order to communicate with Australia and Telstra does not operate there. The same service was done in Nadi for \$5 F but this is not available in remote areas, thus denying a large number of rural people what we consider basic internet services..

Another very disturbing event was alleged to have happened prior to my recent trip, when a group of Chinese dissidents were whisked out of the country in the middle of the night by a Chinese army commando unit and flown back to China. I have no means of checking the truth of this but I heard it from two separate sources, both of which I consider were in the know,.

The perception of Australia is negative and exploitative and Radio Australia could have had a large positive influence. I can sympathise with the attitude Nauru recently took on overseas news reporting, because the reporting is sometimes rather condescending and negative, and gives the impression that Australia knows best. A recent interview I heard here was from a professor of journalism at a tertiary institution in Australia, who claimed that the role of a journalist was to create doubt. While this may seem innocuous in the Australian context, it could be devastating in a multicultural and multi racial country like Fiji, with a history of sometimes divisive politics. Radio Australia should be playing a major role in keeping the various factions on good positive terms with each other, and absolutely neutral. This has been most obvious with entry of Bainimama, who has been often portrayed in the negative when judged by overseas democratic standards which may not be entirely relevant in the Fiji context, where chiefly status was most important and still is. to many rural people with along and proud history of very strong leadership.. I heard this point of view several times at village level, around bowls of kava and radio Australia could have been very helpful.

The current Fiji President has expressed this view and the supposition that the Australian system of doing things is the only system. The Fijian have their own way of doing things which needs acknowledging, as does the Indian. Radio Australia had a unique opportunity to cater for either or both views., and blend them together.

There are several ways that Australia could promote mutual interests. both via radio and practical projects .

Considering that we benefit from the trained professionals coming here, (see above) many families have difficulties getting their children to school because of transport costs. Our Govt could help here and it would go down very well-particularly in the rural areas. Transport costs are a major proportion of education costs there. Radio also could play a major part, although Radio Fiji does a good job.

Associate with this, is early childhood education. There are some magnificent early childhood educational programs in Australia, and help with infrastructure would be well received. Early childhood education is a developing pattern along the same lines in Fiji, which is presented

3.very well. Radio Australia could have been of immense help there in a technical sense. I suspect that China will move in this direction unopposed, starting with language.

Rubbish is a problem and is very bad in Suva. Radio Australia could play a big part here with education on health matters, and recycling- particularly with programs to Younger students, and presented with a local bias.

It was noted with regret here in Alice Spring that the HF outback was cut at the same time and has caused a lot of inconvenience. This was the means by which emergency notices went out to travellers out of normal radio range. This was extremely short sighted and done on the assumption that everyone has access to internet or mobile phone in remote areas, which is just not the case.

It appears to me that to cut these services has been to the long term detriment of Australia, and purely for the purpose of saving a few short term dollars. I don 't believe that it has been in the best long term interests of the Pacific countries as well land has left them vulnerable to other interests, which may well not be our long term interests.

I do not profess to be an expert in these matters, but my three children were all born there and retain their heritage.. My wife's family are well connected and having lived with the rural communities both Fijian and India has been a great experience, and privalege and I consider the place as my other home. Consequently the insidious manner in which it is being impinged upon is sad.

Sincerely

Trevor Shiell

26/7/18