

**Port Macquarie Country Labor
Submission
October 2000**

Parliament of Australia
Standing Committee on Communications,
Transport and the Arts

Inquiry Into:

**The Adequacy of Radio Services in
*non Metropolitan Australia***

Preamble

The Port Macquarie Branch of Country Labor presents this submission in which we seek to demonstrate serious deficiencies in local broadcast radio programming in Regional Australia.

We believe the needs of the community in general, ie the local audience and the business community, have to a large extent been neglected by the present management of commercial and public radio broadcasters in Port Macquarie.

We also submit that under the present broadcast operation the ability to provide immediate and urgent information in cases of emergency is made more difficult because the main panel operation of the radio stations are located outside the region.

In our view a broadcast operator which is unable to provide a close association with the community and it's audience should be found wanting in its operations and outside the requirements of its operating licence.

We hold concerns that the provisions of current broadcasting legislation does not adequately ensure that those that receive broadcasting licences meet their obligations as outlined in their original commitments stated in their initial tender documents.

The Port Macquarie Country Labor Branch is a community organisation and as such, we have received many expressions of concern by local residents regarding the downgrading of commercial radio services servicing the Port Macquarie and Kempsey regions, the Local Government areas of Hastings and Macleay.

Our members welcome this inquiry and hope that this submission outlines community concerns and provides information so you may undertake further research and determine a new direction for the improvement of local radio in non Metropolitan areas of Australia.

Social Benefits

It is traditional for communities from regional areas to rely on local commercial radio stations for the latest information on emergencies and natural disasters, weather information and the discussion of local issues so as to be informed of what is happening in their community.

Sections of the Mid North Coast serviced by Commercial Radio and the ABC are subjected to floods, bushfires, emergencies at sea, major road accidents on the Pacific and Oxley highways etc.

Both the local commercial radio and ABC radio provide the majority of their programs on relay from other parts of Australia. In our view it is impossible to provide the urgent broadcast of information regarding the situations described above and for the community to obtain immediate updated information. With the group of commercial radio stations on relay from Albury, and the ABC on relay from Sydney, in addition, the studios being manned by computer, the local communities have no immediate knowledge of disasters and the effect or coordination on/in their community.

Evidence has shown, particularly in the specific case of when a bushfire broke out in the Macksville area, during September 2000, both commercial radio stations were on relay and it was three-quarters of an hour before the radio station's broadcasted any information relating to the emergency. When the details were broadcast they were unreliable given the time difference. You do not need much imagination to understand or realise how far a bushfire can travel in three-quarters of an hour.

Country citizens depend on their radio stations for information and news, especially during wet weather for cancellations of school excursions, sporting events, community events etc. The expectations from regional radio audiences are not unrealistic. In addition to the professional presentation of radio programming, local citizens expect to be informed on all matters affecting their communities.

Up-to-date news, weather information, public transport information including plane, ferry, bus, coach information and country link rail timetables, river and water information, radio interviews from government and community leaders and discussion of current issues from radio should be accessible 24 hours a day.

A vibrant economic, social, cultural and environmentally conscious community demands quality radio services. If the Mid North Coast is any measure of what is happening in other areas of regional Australia, then the only response is that globalisation is not serving local communities and a new radio broadcasting framework is required.

Economic Benefits

Decentralisation of radio services in the Mid North Coast has impacted on employment and provision of services. In 1988 radio 2MC in Port Macquarie had a staff of 34 people and at present has a staff of less than 20. We attribute this to amalgamation and decentralisation of services provided by 2MC and Star FM to the hub centre, based in Albury NSW.

This obviously has serious effect on local employment and career opportunities with subsequent loss of business activity for the local community.

Employment opportunities have been greatly reduced particularly in the areas of announcers (on-air personalities), marketing and promotional companies (production of commercials) and news (journalism).

The Daily Mail Group (DMG) in Port Macquarie ie 2MC and Star FM employs one journalist to provide the local news service seven days a week. The DMG journalist is required also to do an on-air shift. Regional ABC employs three journalists for the same coverage area. The news service provided is little more than media releases and news handouts.

Therefore we suggest that the concentration of broadcast licences to large companies has had a detrimental effect on local employment, business activity, community information and opportunities for local residents.

The Commonwealth has control over radio frequencies/licences and as such should have high regard to the social consequences of radio licensing rather than the mere financial benefits to the Commonwealth flowing from such licensing.

It is very clear that local citizens are not benefiting to the extent we deserve from radio services in their regions.

Radio Broadcast Licensing

The Port Macquarie Branch of Country Labor has had concerns since June 2000 on the downgrading of commercial radio services for the mid north coast of New South Wales and has actively taken up the matter with the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

A copy of our letter and subsequent ABA reply is located at Attachment 1 and 2 respectively for your information.

Of particular concern is that the ABA has stated, “that there is no current obligation on each licensee to provide an ‘adequate and comprehensive’ service in its own right” as there had been under previous legislation - Broadcasting Act 1942.

This would suggest that there has been a downgrading of Commonwealth legislation in relation to the regulatory environment of radio broadcasting. The ABA reply is self-explanatory and should be reviewed in relation to your inquiry.

One of the significant issues that we believe requires in-depth investigation, is that those companies and organisations that have tendered for radio licences have specifically outlined the reasons for their ability to provide quality services. Our correspondence to the ABA demonstrates that these undertakings and tender obligations do not need to be honoured in the current framework of broadcast licensing. This can only be at the detriment of regional listeners.

We request that the inquiry undertake in-depth examination of those specific undertakings by companies who have received licences and whether they are being met.

We provide observations regarding current legislation as specified under the next heading.

Legislation

We refer the committee to the following areas of the **Broadcasting Services ACT (CTH) 1992**:

Objects of this Act

- (a) to promote the availability to audiences throughout Australia on a diverse range of radio and television services offering entertainment, education and information;**

This is not happening in our view. The radio station 2MC and Star FM are providing only music and commercial programs, and radio 531 is a glorified musak program similar to that originating from 2CH in Sydney. This station has no local news service or community announcements which are expected from a regional based station.

- (b) To provide a regulatory environment that will facilitate the development of a broadcasting industry in Australia that is efficient, competitive and responsive to audience needs;**

We submit that D. M. G. with its ownership and control of 15 radio stations in New South Wales is not providing competitive and responsible services to it's audiences needs. These needs can be totally different and diverse from one region to another. It is not possible in our view to properly meet the program needs of the Port Macquarie area from Albury.

- (c) To encourage diversity in control of the more influential broadcasting services;**

In the present circumstances this section of the Act is not being met given the structure of the present ownership of radio stations on the Mid North Coast. As the committee would realise, a corporate search of DMG and AMI would show that they have monopoly ownership of commercial radio stations on the Mid North Coast. It is also pertinent to note that this situation exists in many other areas of New South Wales.

DMG now owns 15 commercial radio stations in regional New South Wales. AMI owns three stations which are servicing the same areas as DMG stations - Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Orange.

(d) To ensure that Australians have effective control of the more influential broadcasting services;

There appears to be every reason to believe that managerial policy for DMG is formulated and directed from the parent company in London and this appears to breach this section.

(e) To promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity;

Cultural diversity requirements under the current radio provisions for the mid North Coast are not being met. There is no programming demonstrated for special groups such as Indigenous people, the Sikk community of Coffs Harbour and other ethnic minorities in regional areas.

(f) To promote the provision of high-quality and innovative programming by providers of broadcasting services;

Programming lacks diversity - it does not meet community group needs e.g. agriculture, sport, Australian music industry, local education news, and community organisations e.g. environmental awareness groups, church and school groups etc

(g) To encourage providers of commercial and community broadcasting services to be responsive to the need for a fair and accurate coverage of matters of public interest and appropriate coverage of matters of local significance;

We especially draw the committee's attention to matters of local significance. There is a glaring deficiency in programming in this area in regard to matters of public interest ie visits by VIPs, senior public servants, health matters, and other policy issues. There is no facility for this to be done in their program format.

Section 8 2a - the provision of an adequate and comprehensive range of broadcasting services in that area.

We submit that the radio services provided by 2MC and Star FM, 2Way FM, and Regional ABC, are not providing adequate or comprehensive broadcasting services.

New Technology

Understanding that to keep up with the ever changing demands of radio listeners and the development of new technology, digital radio will be introduced in not too distant future.

Digital radio will be the new way of transmitting and receiving radio signals. Digital radio will allow for more efficient use of the broadcasting spectrum and will allow more stations to be heard on one frequency.

With the introduction of this new technology, reception will improve, however the Port Macquarie Branch of Country Labor have grave concerns that the new radio technology will be consumed by the present consortium that the control the present radio stations in New South Wales. Whilst listeners will receive a better quality of sound and varied music, the program format will remain the same and regional radio listeners will have more of what they are receiving today.

We advocate that with the introduction of digital technology, a licence holder should only be allowed to hold four licences in any one state. Two FM licences and two AM licences. This would allow for more flexibility, more competition and better radio programming in services for regional radio listeners.

There is a major consolidation of radio ownership in regional Australia. We see current trend of ownership of commercial radio on the Mid North Coast it has stifled competition and diversity of programming between Laurieton and Woolgoolga on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales.

Unfortunately for listeners, the Mid North Coast currently has common ownership of commercial radio stations situated at Port Macquarie, Kempsey and Coffs Harbour. With a combined population of 180,000 residents, the area deserves a more diverse range of radio services to meet local residents expectations.

If there are difficulties in changing the current framework of radio licences to achieve regional needs, then the introduction of new technology should provide the opportunity.

Conclusion

In relation to Port Macquarie, we believe that the two commercial radio stations and to a lesser degree the ABC, prepare and present programs from studios located on the Mid North Coast only a few hours a day. There is no locally based programming or presentation taking place over the majority of the weekend and most programming is provided through relay.

A local radio station becomes recognised as an accepted part of the region and community, and this is primarily as a result of its locality within the community and local content. It becomes extremely difficult for a radio station to become an integral part of the community when services are predominantly provided by relay from centralised locations around Australia.

With radio operations located outside of the region it services, the responsibility to meet and satisfy the perceived and actual community needs can only be compromised and would appear grounds for serious consideration of whether an operator is meeting the provisions of its licence. If this is not the case, then the provisions of licences under broadcasting legislation needs to be changed to ensure the priority of local content and broadcasting. There is a definite opportunity to change the radio framework with new technology.

Whilst new technology has historically brought a range of new services and it will continue to do so, it is the community's role through our elected representatives to ensure that the type and nature of services provided meets community expectations.

It is our belief that Regional radio was created on a basis of serving the local community and as such, should continue to provide those services that many regional residents have come to expect.

We would welcome a current and historical independent analysis of audience views over a continuum to adequately show that ratings demonstrate that commercial radio is or is not servicing the community. We also believe that an investigation of the positive and negative effects of digital radio broadcasting in other countries would allow for the best development of a broadcasting framework in Australia.

In summary, local radio needs to be closely associated and connected with the community with the region that the station is licensed to serve. Unfortunately, if the mid North Coast is any gauge of what is happening in other parts of Australia, a bipartisan approach from our elected representatives advocating the needs of regional constituents is required. The recent legislative result of limiting digital television to an oligopoly should not be replicated in radio.