



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT
AND THE ARTS

Reference: Adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia

WEDNESDAY, 8 NOVEMBER 2000

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS
Friday, 8 December 2000

Members: Mr Neville (*Chair*), Mr Gibbons, Mr Hardgrave, Mr Jull, Mr Lindsay, Ms Livermore, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Murphy and Mr St Clair

Members in attendance: Mr Gibbons, Mr Hardgrave, Ms Livermore, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Neville and Mr St Clair

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on the adequacy of radio services in regional and rural Australia and the extent to which there is a need for the Government to take action in relation to the quantity and the quality of radio services in regional and rural Australia, having particular regard to the following:

- The social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors;
- Future trends in radio broadcasting, including employment and career opportunities, in non-metropolitan Australia;
- The effect on individuals, families and small business in non-metropolitan Australia of networking of radio programming, particularly in relation to local news services, sport, community service announcements and other forms of local content, and;
- The potential for new technologies such as digital radio to provide enhanced and more localised radio services in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

WITNESSES

HALL, Mr Ken, President, Radio For All Australians Association Inc..... 1

Committee met at 9.57 a.m.**HALL, Mr Ken, President, Radio For All Australians Association Inc.**

CHAIR—I declare open the committee's first public hearing of the inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia. In doing so, I welcome the first witness to the inquiry, Mr Ken Hall, from Radio for All Australians. For many years, Mr Hall has been most dedicated to this particular field. This inquiry gives him the opportunity to state his views on the record. I welcome you, Mr Hall, and thank you for making your time available today to meet the committee.

We have had a number of submissions which refer to the value of dedicated radio stations for the print handicapped. We are interested in hearing more about the role of your association and the views you have in relation to our current inquiry. Before we proceed, I have to caution you that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, committee hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of any false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and could be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. Mr Hall, you might like to make a short opening statement for three to five minutes, then we will ask you questions.

Mr Hall—It is going to be a bit hard for me to do in three to five minutes, because radio is going to be very hard for me to talk about because of just the way things are.

CHAIR—Just go at your own pace, then.

Mr Hall—First of all, when television was introduced to Australia we were told it was the greatest thing to come forward; it would be educational and it would do everything that Australians would need. I am sorry to say that was completely wrong. It cannot help the 6.8 million Australians with print handicap problems. We are blind; we are, like me, brain-damaged; we have Parkinson's disease; we are elderly lying in hospital beds who cannot see the wall in front of us. You ask them to watch TV. They cannot watch TV, and there is no way in the world that you can get an idea from TV what is going on. Radio is the part which is missing in Australia now to do this.

When Paul Keating was in government, his children said to him, 'Dad, we want a station for the young people.' He gave them Triple J. We are asking for a station for all print handicapped people. You have it already in the capital cities under RPH stations. The RPH stations can only transmit about 120 kilometres. The people in the city can have a little radio, they can have a big boomer or they can listen to it in their car. As soon as you go out of those city limits, we are not entitled to hear it. That is appalling. It is not right. The Aborigines themselves today up in the Northern Territory have radio to do these types of programs for them. I am an Australian, I was born here, yet I do not get it. If I choose to live in the city, I have the right to turn it on. Why should I be told I cannot have it because I live outside the city? In Brisbane they have 300,000 listeners to an RPH station which can only run between six and eight hours per day, and half the programs are from the ABC or BBC. Yet, if you look at your record in government, you spend about \$5.8 million across Australia for these radio stations—there is a total of 166 that get the money for the print handicapped and these types of programs. It does not go anywhere. I would like to know where it goes to because it is not happening.

I have got graphics with me. I have to draw graphics to remember where I am up to. We are talking now about the ABA, the Australian Broadcasting Authority. They never saw the future for where radio could go for people like me, and the elderly lying in hospital beds. They gave away broadcasting licences just like they were made out of sugar. They gave them to community radio stations. Now, community radio stations have no laws to control them. They can sit there, as long as they do not swear on the radio or do anything bad and get complaints about what they are talking about, and do what they like. A community radio station in New South Wales a few months ago was talking about \$7 million for a community radio station. That is huge money. If they get that, their sponsorships will carry them. That is not business radio but it will be a business as soon as it starts up because the sponsors just make sure it is. You have taken the community radio, given it to these people for \$7 million or \$14 million and away they go.

My next point is that I live in Hervey Bay. I turn the radio on up there. I get Bundaberg at 9 o'clock, I get Maryborough at 9 o'clock, I get Gympie at 9 o'clock, I get Toowoomba at 9 o'clock and the others—and I have John Laws on. At 12 o'clock I get all rock-and-roll music because it is all coming from the computers down in Victoria or New South Wales. Gone are the days when I could sit there and ring up my radio station when there is a flood or something on and say, 'Excuse me, can you tell me what is happening in this area?' Now it is, 'No, we can't do that,' because you are talking to somebody in New South Wales who has no idea. The programs have gone to shot and we are missing out.

Education: just think of what we could do with radio. It is unbelievable to think that out there we have young and elderly people who just cannot pick up things the normal way but if you speak to them, they learn—and radio is the best way for that. I have met many young ones who while they are studying sit in their room with the radio on. They listen not to music but to talking programs, because they are learning just from those. I believe it is the government of today that has made this happen and by which we have lost all of this.

I am a person who cannot read or write. I had a heart job done about three months ago. I had to come out of the operating room and lie still for 18 hours. I was told I could read a book or a magazine—but I cannot. I asked the nurse for a radio and she said, 'Are you blind?' I said, 'No.' She said, 'Are you vision impaired?' I said, 'No.' She said, 'You are not entitled to a radio.' Why? I should be entitled like anybody else, but I am brain-damaged.

I have sat down many times with government department officers and they say to me, 'To get what you are after, Mr Hall, there are RPH stations out there doing exactly what you want.' An RPH station will put out that program to my house but I have to pay \$2,500 for a satellite dish to go on my roof. Then they will supply me with a special radio to go in that room. Then I am to sign a contract to say that I am the only person who is going to listen to that in that household. Yet the people in Brisbane can all tootle around in a car, do what they like and just listen to it.

Senator Alston has stated in many letters to me and to our organisation that I must see the Blind Society or RPH: they are the people who will help me. Because I am not blind or vision impaired, they will not even listen to me. I cannot be a member of their organisation or of anything, so I have no say. Yet am I not just as bad as them? I cannot read or write—they cannot see, I know—but that is part of my life and I have to live with it. But I do not think it is right that I should be in the same situation, whatever way you like to put it.

In Hervey Bay we have about 240 people in nursing homes. Most are elderly. Some of them are young—something has happened to them; they cannot move their bodies and they lie in bed all day. Do any of you, as politicians, ever go into these places and read them a newspaper? Do you ever go there and read them a book or a newsletter? I do go there, but I cannot read. I sit beside them and talk to them. The other part of this is that the nurses do not have the time to do it. So who does it? Do you think it is fair that somebody with a fantastic brain should lie in bed for 16 hours a day and not have the right to listen to programs like the ones I am talking about? That is about all I can say at the moment.

CHAIR—Thank you for that evidence. It is very compelling. I thank you for your courage in putting it together. I cannot speak for my colleagues but I am sure there is a fair deal of sympathy for your case.

The problem is that, while we can take evidence from you and the RPH stations, what we have to put in our report is something that is achievable. I have a personal view that we probably need, even over and above the RPH stations, some central broadcasting facility—whether that would be tendered out to the ABC, the SBS or some organisation like that—that would provide a general feed for a series of narrowcast stations. I think the practicality of putting it in regional AM or FM stations is pretty remote. You might get the odd one in Townsville, Canberra, Geelong, Newcastle or in some big places like that, but I do not think in the reality of things we are going to see a whole network of stations, so I think your best opportunity probably lies with narrowcast stations.

The question then is: how do you distribute the signal? Who backs you up, if you are a lot of small country stations, with a primary fee to keep you going during the day and the night? This is a personal view of mine and I would like you to comment on it: perhaps you need a central feed contracted out to someone like the ABC. Then you would use for part of the day the RPH feed and locally you would have people read the local news, the funeral notices, the weather reports, the community announcements and all those sorts of things. How do you envisage it?

Mr Hall—I always dreamed that the government would get behind the idea and just put one national station all over Australia. I do not know how it could be done but it could be done. From then on the regional stations would have to play their part. The ABC has regional stations all over the place. We only need an hour and a quarter of their time. You only need about 20 minutes in the morning, about a quarter of an hour at 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and then a piece at night-time. I think those regional stations are already there but there is no guidance for them to do this.

CHAIR—I do not think they are available, Mr Hall, because in our last inquiry into the ABC sporting service we discovered that once you get beyond a certain limit, except for a few stations that the TAB has bought at an earlier stage, like 4IP in Brisbane and a few like that, they rely very heavily on these small narrowcast stations. If your organisation were forced into the same area, how would you see those being linked up to some sort of common feed?

Mr Hall—It would have to be a windows type idea. Already in the states you have RPH stations. You would use them as regional stations and for the places that have not got them the community radio stations would come in and play their part. But how do you get a community radio station that is free to do those types of programs? It is very hard across the board to think

about how it can be done. All I know is the Australian Communications Authority have come to me—their workers from Rockhampton came down and saw me—and said, 'If it has to be done we can do it. If we are told to do it we can do it.'

CHAIR—Would you like to be a Hervey Bay RPH or would you like to be a Hervey Bay independent?

Mr Hall—I think I would like to be Hervey Bay national so we were putting it all across Australia. I do not want just a few people to have what everybody should have. We cannot see into the future or whether there are going to be a stack of people out in the middle of Australia. If for some reason they build a hospital out there and these patients are put out there, they need it too.

Mr JULL—Maybe I should prefix this by saying that I am a patron of 4RPH in Brisbane, just to get that on the record. Mr Hall, basically what you are envisaging is a network that would provide national programs which would come in the form of some current affairs being read, book readings, and general education and information programs.

Mr Hall—Yes.

Mr JULL—You would supplement that in different areas with local news, probably read from the local newspapers, local information, local sport, perhaps handicapped sport, weather reports and that sort of thing. Ideally—and do not let me put words into your mouth—you are looking at a 24-hour operation if you are looking at servicing those people who are visually impaired or have other difficulties that do not allow them to read.

Mr Hall—It has to be a 24-hour service. There is no way in the world it can be anything under that. It has to be a 24-hour service and we believe that would be ongoing all the time.

Mr JULL—So basically in setting up the arrangement ideally for you, you would have a central provider which would put online everything from the book readings to the educational programs, and a number of times a day you would drop out for local programs such as the news?

Mr Hall—That is right; it would be done the way they do it through windows now.

Mr JULL—Have you spoken to the ABC and have they given you any indication that they have a series of transmitters across Australia which have a stand-by facility not unlike the one that is used for the broadcast of parliamentary services and their national news program? If they have given you that indication, I wonder if there has been a request to them as to whether or not that could be utilised to provide a service after the style that you are talking about?

Mr Hall—I have to bring this to your attention. I get no funding. I am a pensioner. I have done this all off my own bat. We have been annoying everybody now for about six years. All we have got from the ABC is that they would not be happy with the type of programs we are talking about. One of the managers just came back and said his mother is in her 80s and she is happy to listen to the ABC as it is—that is as far as we have got with the ABC. But I believe,

from stories I have heard—and you can only say ‘stories’—that there is one sitting on the side there somewhere we could use.

Mr JULL—That is my understanding, and in actual fact you would not need too many of these, because they are AM transmitters. Because of the power of those transmitters you would not need too many—which would in fact give you Australia-wide coverage.

Mr Hall—That is right. We understand the same from just talking to the people.

Mr JULL—I understand, for example, there is one in Orange which would give you most of the west of New South Wales. There are a couple in Queensland that would give you most of the coverage there, and no doubt there would be others in other states. Maybe that is a line that we could perhaps follow a little bit down the line, if my assumptions are correct. The sense of frustration that I can understand from people who are visually impaired leads to some pretty dreadful situations, doesn't it?

Mr Hall—Yes, it does. I am not going to drop names, but we have an elderly lady who is known all across Australia for her swimming—she is still swimming today and she is the champion. Three months ago she went blind, and we are trying to stop that woman from committing suicide because her husband cannot read her the newspaper or the books or magazines. When I ask my wife to read me something out of the newspaper, she picks out the parts she thinks I want to hear and then carries on with them. I say, ‘Excuse me, did you read that all?’ ‘No.’ I said, ‘Go through the lot, because there could be something.’ It is very hard to ask your partner or anybody to do that for you. But there was a part there I just missed out on that you were asking about.

Mr JULL—Some of the consequences for people who are shut in, for people who have a lack of access to the outside world. You have given an indication—you say this woman is threatening suicide—but there is a great deal of that around.

Mr Hall—We have had eight phone calls from different people who have said to us, ‘We have helped our partner to commit suicide. If you had up and running what we are talking about, a radio for all Australians to do the newspaper and books, my husband or wife would be still alive.’ And the reason is, you find when you start talking to them, that they would retire and maybe read two newspapers a day in the morning and then go to the library—and some get two books out and some get three books out. And suddenly, for no reason at all, they lose their eyesight. For the first week or two weeks, the Blind Society or Vision Australia will come in and say, ‘We will help you with this’, ‘We will help you with that’—but in fact there is no help. It is up to the partner, and the partner has to do everything. And it only takes a few weeks and the partner is then saying, ‘I can't handle this any more’. So that is what happens. I do not like being in that position; but it happens and we get those phone calls.

Mr JULL—It has often been said, and I think it would be particularly correct in those circumstances, that probably the greatest social problem that we have in Australia is loneliness and all that that leads to.

Mr Hall—That is right.

Mr JULL—And a network of this type might in fact be a solution to overcoming some of that loneliness, because a very intimate relationship exists between radio and its listener, if it is handled properly.

Mr Hall—Yes, if it is done properly. I have got some old CDs at home with stories and love stories and romance. At the moment, this woman I am talking about borrows them from me and she sits there with her little CD, and she said that is just keeping her sane at the moment. But it makes you worried. What about people who are in nursing homes now who just feel like doing that right now, but they cannot get any help to do it because they are in a nursing home and the staff are keeping them alive, and they are lying there and they cannot get anybody to read them a newspaper? They will not even turn on a radio, because it is all either rock-and-roll or John Laws. As I say, fair is fair. But they are not given any—

Mr GIBBONS—Not a lot of options.

Mr Hall—Yes, there is not much option. So if we throw them that other option, surely we can change things. I have got one horrible thought going through my brain: whatever happens to me if I end up in that position?

Mr JULL—Have you looked at what the budget costs might be on an operation like this? It would seem to me that it would not necessarily be a very expensive operation.

Mr Hall—We have worked it out at between \$400,000 and \$500,000 and sponsorship, we believe, would help to pay for most of it. The reason for saying this is that Centrelink has come back to us a couple of times and said, 'If you get this up and running, we would be able to use your station to inform everybody who is living in different little areas around, instead of just having one little place covered.'

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Bruce Scott, came up with a fantastic idea a few years back to let all his veterans know what was going on. He came up and paid RPH Australia \$25,000 to broadcast through Queensland what was going on, but it failed because they only had that little station in Brisbane and one up in Cairns. He had to withdraw that because the people out there were not getting it. Some people live on farms. Some live under rocks. They are all entitled to know.

Mr JULL—In actual fact the cost of the service provision would be principally in the cost of the transmitters and setting up the initial equipment, which does not necessarily have to be very sophisticated or very expensive. Most of the work, and I think virtually all of the work with the RPH networks, is done by volunteers.

Mr Hall—It is. RPH stations have a great future, but for some reason, and I have to use the word, they have not had the vision to go forward on it. They could have done this years ago. Some of those stations have been running for 40 years, but with infighting and things like that they just have not got up and gone ahead.

CHAIR—Are there any outside the capital cities besides Cairns?

Mr Hall—Only Victoria.

Mr JULL—There is one in Victoria.

Mr Hall—They have about three now. They have things on the Internet now asking for help all the way.

Mr JULL—But the Internet is not going to be the answer for the visually handicapped, is it?

Mr Hall—No. What I am saying is they are asking for help on the Internet from people who can read. They are going to them asking for help because they reckon they have not got enough money. I would like to bring this point up. About 20 years ago RPH stations in each state were funded by the federal government and then they got a lot of money from the state. Then we got RPH Australia which set itself up in Victoria. They said to all these little stations, 'We will take you under our umbrella. We will fight the government and get all this money and then hand it out to you.' I am sorry to say I do not think that is happening. For instance, Brisbane can only go from six to eight hours some days and then half the time their programs are the ABC or the BBC. By the way, if you have cricket on the ABC, the Blind Society, through the RPH, has the same cricket on. Why? It is on the ABC and a couple of other stations, so why go and pick out a program like that when it is already being done?

Mr JULL—I think you have struck one of the difficulties on the head. There are so many organisations, and I am not decrying their operations at all, but small organisations that represent people who are visually handicapped and people who have sight and reading problems, and there is no coordination of that. They all operate as separate entities and it is almost impossible to get a united group together to really drive this. Basically, if you were to get it off the ground, you would need a centralised separate organisation whose sole responsibility would be to provide radio programs for visually handicapped people.

Mr Hall—There are 80 different branches in Queensland alone, and they do not talk to each other. I went to the RPH station in Brisbane. After arranging a meeting, I arrived on a Thursday, and the meeting was for 10'clock. I got to the two big glass doors at the time and knocked. This little old lady walked down the steps and she said, 'Are you friend or foe?' I said, 'Excuse me?' She said, 'Are you friend or foe?' I said, 'I am Ken Hall from Hervey Bay and I have come to see the manager.' She said, 'No, no. Are you friend or foe?' She said, 'If you are not a friend, we do not open the doors. If you are a friend, we will open the doors.' She opened the doors and I went inside and she said, 'He is not coming in today.' I said, 'Hang on. I am going to put my foot down here. I made an appointment.' She rang him at home and he turned up about two hours later. When he arrived and went upstairs she took me by the hand and said, 'Please don't upset him. He will get a migraine and throw a wobbly all day.' I only had two minutes with that man. I said, 'Radio for all Australians. Ken Hall.' He said, 'No, we can't help you,' and that was it. That is what you run into, and there are 80 of them in Queensland. From there I went to Stone's Corner Blind Society. When I was there I just happened to mentioned the RPH. They said, 'We don't talk to them.' I went out to Moorooka to the braille mob and they don't talk to the other two. I found that happens in all the states, by the sounds of it. There is a lot of that, so it is very hard. It has to come under one umbrella and it cannot be, I am sorry to say, the Blind Society because they do not have that—

Mr JULL—They are just not equipped to do it.

Mr Hall—They are not equipped. They have all the equipment we need to do this.

CHAIR—Is the answer then some centrally based feed that a lot of local people can tack on to, so that they can pick windows and read local newspapers and funeral notices and all those sorts of things?

Mr Hall—Yes. I am not that type of person to work that out, but it has to be done somewhere.

Mr GIBBONS—Going back to the idea of a centrally based feed, as the chair called it, have you approached the community radio organisation? I know there is a peak body, but it seems to me that there is probably a community radio signal being received everywhere in Australia, be it by a whole range of independent community radio stations or broadcasters. My view would be that those community stations, in return for their licence, should have a moral obligation to provide some community radio which your people are well and truly part of.

Mr Hall—Yes, but there is nothing to make them stay with it.

Mr GIBBONS—I understand there is no legislative material to make them do it.

Mr Hall—No, they can just change things.

Mr GIBBONS—Are none of them interested in doing it on a voluntary basis as part of their community?

Mr Hall—No, because at the moment they are quite happy to leave it to the RPH stations. I believe the Blind Society has a lot of clout and a lot of power. Senator Alston is making sure of that, it seems to me.

Mr MOSSFIELD—My point was exactly the same as Steve has just spelt out. Each region does have a community radio station. If part of the community radio station's charter was to provide a service for visually handicapped people, plus the local news, which does not happen now—sport, floods, bushfires and community news—and the community station also has the opportunity of taking, say, programs from the ABC—generally speaking, I think the ABC provides a good all-round radio service; I listen to it in both the morning and the afternoon and I find it quite good—is that concept a possibility?

Mr Hall—That concept is a possibility. You say you enjoy the ABC. At the moment you can read, write and do all that. But just think in the future if something happens. Then the ABC would not give you that sort of—

Mr MOSSFIELD—Yes. But I did say that this community radio station would also have a charter to provide a service for visually handicapped people. It may not be a 24-hour service, but would have programs to read local newspapers or to read the newspapers and to do the things that visually handicapped people require.

Mr Hall—What do you do with community radio stations who already have their licence and sit down and say they will get Warren Truss to give them a letter of support, then they get the councillors to give them a letter of support, and then they swear in a president, a secretary and everything like that for their committee and start off doing exactly what we are talking about with these types of programs? Then somebody moves up from Victoria and says, 'I don't like that station.' So they move in and kick that president and secretary out and change the rules. Then they can have rock-and-roll and they can change that community.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Can that happen easily?

Mr Hall—That happens now, yes.

Mr JULL—It certainly happened in Hervey Bay.

Mr Hall—It happens everywhere.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Well, things have to be tightened up a bit so that, whatever the original intent of that community radio station, it should not be changed unless there are some very good reasons.

Mr Hall—But they do, and they can make big money out of it. We have one in Hervey Bay at the moment which has, I believe, \$100,000. They are having a little bit of an aerial problem and have gone to the local government to get money to fix up that aerial. What are they doing with a large amount of money like that but cannot fix up their own aerial? We are making it—

Mr MOSSFIELD—Too easy for them, yes.

Ms LIVERMORE—I want to understand exactly the type of programming that, for example, Brisbane RPH has now that would distinguish it from other radio stations and whether you consider that fills the needs that you are talking about. For example, how often would they have the local newspaper or those sorts of notices read?

Mr Hall—They read the newspaper every morning. There is something to do with copyright laws, but sometimes you will hear them do the *Australian* and next minute they will do the *Courier-Mail*. They seem to move from one to another. Sometimes they do that a few times. I have even heard them read the *Canberra Times*. I have heard them read other papers. Some of the other RPH stations do go through too many newspapers. I believe there are a couple down this way; they do four or five newspapers. That is a bit too much because already you have heard the news from the *Australian* and then they do the next one and the next one. There should be times then to bring in other types of things such as for the young ones to learn, to be educated, for the oldie who is lying there who needs a story or something. We would love to learn about what you people are doing all the time, but if we turn on TV we get seven minutes of motor car accidents, the next three minutes about Clinton in America and then we get football. Some of the people in parliament tell me I should be happy with that.

Ms LIVERMORE—When I turn on the radio I only get what the radio presenters say—you do not get unlimited choice in any circumstances. I guess what I am trying to work out is what

would be the bare minimum to be included in normal radio programming that you would see as meeting the needs of print handicapped or visually impaired people.

Mr Hall—I have not got any lists with me, but the RPH programs themselves cover a lot of things. But they cover things like Cooking Hour—you do not need Cooking Hour where they are telling you how to make cakes and things like that. You can pick that up anywhere, really. There is the share market—farmers like to know a bit more.

Ms LIVERMORE—I guess the bare minimum that is missing from what would be on a local ABC station or Radio National or something like that, which have educational and those sorts of programs, for visually impaired people is that very local community notice board sort of information.

Mr Hall—Yes. But we do need to know what is going on across the nation first and then you bring all that in.

Mr JULL—Could I just intervene on that? On the Brisbane one they do read the *Courier-Mail*; they do read the *Australian*; they read all the local suburban handouts, and that is done over a week; they read *Australasian Post*; they read *Readers' Digest*; and they read some features from the *Bulletin* magazine. I think they are the principal ones, and then there are the book readings. They also use the old radio recordings. *Yes What*, for example, gets a reasonable run. What are some of the others from up your way?

Mr Hall—*Dad and Dave*.

Mr JULL—A lot of those old radio dramas are still available, and of course they are excellent for what we are talking about.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We have had the discussion before about these matters, and it still strikes me that if Radio National has a one per cent audience share around Australia—in other words, 99 per cent of Australians never listen to Radio National—that is where some of the answers to your problems lie: to get the ABC Radio National service to become the sort of service you are talking about.

Mr Hall—They did a story on the ABC, and I would like to find out the feedback on that. They did a bit of a serial a few months ago—I think it might be still going—and they had listeners listening everywhere to that, but they will not take any notice of that feedback; they would rather sit down and do talkbacks and things like that. We are finding with the ABC at the moment, when you hear Radio National and then you go to the regional, you are nearly copping the same thing. The ABC has gone out on what it is supposed to be doing. They are not doing half the—

CHAIR—Too much networking?

Mr Hall—Too much networking. You can nearly pull up the same thing on all the ABC stations, and they are regional stations and should not be all the same.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Can I just explore that? You say the ABC did something a few months ago that was obviously of appeal to you and your colleagues. You offered them feedback and the ABC themselves have not given you feedback on what the people's reaction was?

Mr Hall—No. As I said, I am just a pensioner and that and I have nothing behind me, and they just treat me that way.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What I guess I am trying to get to the bottom of is that I think we all have an understanding of the difficulties for those who cannot see and those who cannot read, and the need for them to be connected through that kind of radio. A lot of what you are saying is to take it back to some of the old-fashioned radio, some of the theatre of the mind stuff, the dramas and entertainment from those years.

Mr Hall—Yes. Somebody was saying to me the other day that there is a studio being built so that they can do the plays and serials and that.

CHAIR—Yes, the ABC has one at Ultimo.

Mr Hall—Is that being used?

CHAIR—Not much.

Mr Hall—What about the young ones today? Surely there have got to be some people out there who would like to do programming. I have met many people with fantastic voices but when you see them you can understand why they do not get parts in the films.

Mr HARDGRAVE—They are people who have got a great face for radio.

Mr Hall—Yes, they are fantastic for radio—nobody can see them. We have a woman and all the young ones go mad over her, and the poor lady, she is about 80, says, 'I have all these young ones walk through the door and look disappointed.' That is the way it is. You get these fantastic voices but they cannot get a job, so let us give them something.

CHAIR—That is a very good point you make there.

Mr JULL—Mr Hardgrave had a very successful radio career!

CHAIR—Just before we move on, I should introduce Mr Gary Hardgrave, who has had a long history in radio. He is the member for Moreton in Brisbane; and Mr John Murphy is the member for Lowe in New South Wales.

Mr HARDGRAVE—One thing I wanted to point out was if Radio National is running with a one per cent share around Australia at best—it is probably about half a per cent, really—

CHAIR—They claim two or three, don't they?

Mr HARDGRAVE—Its peak programs get a two or three per cent share, not much more.

Mr JULL—And after 9 o'clock in the morning they get stars, they say.

Mr HARDGRAVE—They get stars. That is right; Mr Jull is correct. Mr Hall, what I am saying is that there would be more than one per cent of Australians, by your instincts, interested in the sort of program you want.

Mr Hall—If the government figure is true, there are 6.8 million Australians who cannot read or write because of some problem: surely that is a huge number who would be interested. Even if it is only a quarter of that, it is a huge number, isn't it?

Mr HARDGRAVE—So you think that, if the ABC were to understand that they could in fact get a bigger audience using their Radio National broadcasting system for that 6.8 million to potentially tune in, that would be a good move?

Mr Hall—I believe so, yes. Just nursing homes alone—

CHAIR—So you are talking about three per cent of the population?

Mr Hall—Yes.

Ms LIVERMORE—How would you then incorporate the local content in that?

CHAIR—That was going to be my next question.

Mr Hall—Through the window thing.

Ms LIVERMORE—I see.

CHAIR—Just before you came in, Mr Hardgrave, Mr Jull made the suggestion that, as the ABC have used their stand-by transmitters in the capital cities to do the PNN broadcasting, there are a number of ABC stand-by transmitters in other places, and he asked Mr Hall whether it would be possible to use those. My question was along the lines of what Ms Livermore was going to ask, and it is this. Let us say we use some of those regional stations: obviously you could not have a special program for Hervey Bay and another for Bundaberg and another for Mackay and Townsville.

Mr JULL—Yes, you could.

CHAIR—Well, if you only had one regional station covering 10 or 12 towns—

Mr JULL—There would be no technical reason why you could not drop off for local news. Basically all you need is a microphone and a line and a bit of switching gear to get out to the transmitter, and at 10 o'clock in the morning they drop off for Maryborough local, and at 11 o'clock they drop off for Bundaberg local.

Mr Hall—That is right: you have Bundaberg, and we have Maryborough.

CHAIR—Be that as it may, what I would like you to tell us is how would you see the slotting working? Would you use part of a national feed, part of an RPH feed and then a local feed?

Mr Hall—I am not that brainy or intelligent. That is past me. I do not have that knowledge.

CHAIR—Kirsten, you ask in your words.

Ms LIVERMORE—Yes. We are asking you, as a consumer or someone who would be listening to this imaginary station to get your information, what would you want: a mixture of that?

Mr Hall—If I lived in Hervey Bay, I would need one national, and then when I wanted to I would go to the regional station to get my regional information. It could not be supplied to me in any other way, could it?

CHAIR—Take your own area: You would expect to hear the Bundaberg *News Mail*?

Mr Hall—No. We get Maryborough. You get Bundaberg, because there are two regionals there already. So they are split up like that all along the coast. We can tune into yours in Bundaberg, and we can tune into the Maryborough one. They just drop out from the national and come down to that; so it is there.

CHAIR—So basically you say there needs to be a core national feed, and you are not keen on it being RPH?

Mr Hall—No. I have got letters here where they want to sue me. I have been abused on Sundays with telephone calls to say how dare I try to help them, because I am not blind. How dare I, when I can drive a car and can see things?

CHAIR—But you are print handicapped.

Mr Hall—But they do not see that. They just say how dare I try to get them a radio station when I am not blind or vision impaired, and my wife stands there and hears these phone calls.

CHAIR—Any other questions?

Mr HARDGRAVE—Just two things. One is that, if it were not the local paper read but rather a news service, is that a major problem?

Mr Hall—No, I do not think so. I believe that there could be some work for a lot of newspaper people who are not in the job any more. They could come up and supply the news in that form. You do not have to take it from the newspaper. There must be retired reporters or other people out there who need that sort of work.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The reason I ask that is I know the ABC would say, ‘Look, we cannot possibly use news sources from News Ltd, because that would be program content that we have not generated and we are independent.’ They would complain that they could not do it.

Mr JULL—It is attributed.

Mr HARDGRAVE—They can attribute it, but they nevertheless—

Mr JULL—That is why I do not think the ABC can buy this.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The ABC in fact generally in broadcasts will say, ‘In newspaper reports this morning ...’ and will not even say that the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports it, unless they are not satisfied that the story is ridgy-didge and they put a caveat in their broadcast: ‘The *Sydney Morning Herald* has told us, so we are reporting it here.’

Mr Jull has done a lot of work on this question of stand-by transmitters; but, on that Radio National matter, each centre still has some remnants of ABC studios or links into their system in most areas. And I would have thought, again, that underutilised studio facilities being able to plug into any of the ABC networks is one of the strengths that the ABC often flog—one of the benefits, so they say that no matter where you are around Australia you can find ‘your ABC’. On that basis, could you see yourself cooperating with that already established network?

Mr Hall—We could; yes. I will not say no to that.

Mr JULL—That is a good idea, because you have got a fully equipped studio there, and it is just a matter of getting a plug.

Mr Hall—And away you go.

CHAIR—Yes, I think that is a very good idea. The underutilisation of ABC regional studios is a very good point. In fact, in the Wide Bay area they have a number of studios—in Bundaberg and Maryborough; in Central Queensland they have Gladstone feeding into Rockhampton.

Ms LIVERMORE—Something that came to mind from what I have seen happening in my town of Rockhampton is that the ABC studio is now cooperating very closely with our university and having a lot of journalism and multimedia students coming in. It could even be worth considering whether these regional universities could pick up some of this work, even as practice and work experience for their students.

Mr Hall—Could I mention something about that? In Brisbane, the University of Queensland is already involved with the RPH station. They brought out about eight or nine Irish students, and they went on the radio for about six weeks and nobody could understand a word they said because they had a broad accent. That is what happened. Because they are sponsors of the RPH, they could not be refused; and so they allowed them, but everybody switched off for those six weeks.

CHAIR—The committee recently did an inspection in Western Australia where the Western Australian School of Performing Arts actually ran a community radio station for certain hours of the day. They were quite talented young people. It was training for them, but it also gave some continuity to the community station as well.

Mr JULL—I think Ms Livermore's idea is good, because there is a relationship between 4 RPH and the University of Queensland, but there are a number of the journalists who are also farmed out to the community stations. So it is obviously an established practice to use these community stations as part of their training. If they could work in conjunction with what Mr Hall has envisaged, you would go beyond just reading the newspaper, and that gives you lots of opportunities.

CHAIR—Exactly. Mr Hall, we are going to have to wind up. Do you have any closing comments you would like to make?

Mr Hall—I would just like to say I believe the government of the day, whenever it was, did not look into the future; and we have to clean up this act so that everybody has the right to listen to what I am talking about. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—Once again, we thank you for coming here today and for representing a very important segment of the Australian population. It obviously came at some cost to you to be here, and we appreciate the fact that while you were down here doing other lobbying you made time available to brief us about your Radio For All Australians Association and the concerns you have in relation to regional radio. We trust that, if the committee has any further questions, we can contact you?

Mr Hall—You sure can, yes.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Murphy**):

That this committee authorises the broadcasting of this public hearing and the publication of the evidence given before it this day.

Committee adjourned at 10.45 a.m.