



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

MONDAY, 12 MARCH 2001

GERALDTON

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS
Monday, 12 March 2001

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, Mr Jull, 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.

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Committee met at 4.02 p.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public meeting of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts and its inquiry into regional radio. This has been a very comprehensive process which started in the middle of last year. Let me explain that process for you and the part you will be playing today in that process. Firstly, we pointed out to the minister that people from all three major political parties had concerns about the way regional radio was going. There was a perception, for example, that there was excessive networking. There was a perception that networks were buying up country stations and reducing staff.

The terms of reference were suggested to the minister and he did not accept them. He made up his own terms of reference and they were fourfold. Let me briefly paraphrase them. The first was: what part does radio play in the fabric of regional and rural life? The second was: what part does radio play in employment? By that I think he meant—although we have never asked him—what are the effects, both inside and outside the industry, of radio on employment within the entertainment and media industry and on the communities in which it serves? The third term of reference, and probably the seminal one, was: what is the role of localism in regional and rural radio—local news, local sport, local talkback programs, community announcements and the like? He specifically put into that term of reference the extent to which that was being affected by networking. Finally, the fourth term of reference was: what role do we see for digital radio in the future in country areas? Those were the four terms of reference. They were extensively advertised across Australia and we called for written submissions.

In addition, we advertised in all the radio magazines and we also wrote to every local authority in Australia to alert them because sometimes it is not possible to advertise in every country newspaper in Australia, as much as we would like to—the logistics and the expense of that would have been prohibitive. We did a very comprehensive coverage through the media and we experimented with something here when we came to Geraldton in actually using radio to inform people about the inquiry. Out of that process we got 270 submissions, which the secretariat has been going through.

The next phase was the public hearings. They have taken three forms: meetings in Canberra on our regular meeting day, which is 9 a.m. every Wednesday when the parliament is sitting for two to two and a half hours depending on how many witnesses we have got; going to some of the capitals—being an inquiry into regional radio not many of the capitals—and going into typical provincial, country and remote areas with a reasonable geographic spread. At those meetings, which are inquiry type meetings, we test the witnesses, one organisation, or individual, at a time under cross-examination at the table.

The third method—the one we are doing today—is to have a cross-section of the community in to participate with us on their corporate view of how the particular inquiry issue affects them. In this instance, of course, we want to know what part radio plays in the fabric of life of the mid-west, the west and the north-west of WA. You are, if you like, the stalking horse for that general area of Western Australia. After this we will go to Perth. We will go back into inquiry mode tomorrow and then we will do another one of these in Walpole near Albany—a much smaller community again—before we return to the east coast on Wednesday. So you can see it is a very comprehensive process. Finally, after recalling some witnesses and the Australian

Broadcasting Authority over the next month we will then write our report and make our recommendations, and we hope to table those in parliament in June.

Today is a public forum of an atypical provincial city in that 30,000 to 40,000 population range. We held a similar one at Tamworth on the east coast. In our previous inquiry into the ABC sporting service we actually held one at a little town called Barraba, west of Tamworth. Walpole will be the Barraba of this inquiry.

There has been a bit of criticism, I understand, in the west coast media saying that we should have gone to all the towns in the west coast. Ladies and gentlemen, that is just now physically impossible in the time available. So you are our stalking horses, as I said, and we are looking to get from you the flavour of radio services in this area. I am going to ask a few people to make opening comments. David Priestley might be one to give us a five-minute overview of how he sees it just to set the scene for the committee and for us to get the flavour of what you are saying. I want to point out to you that if you address your questions through the chair you have parliamentary privilege but if you start a cross-chat in the hall then no privilege attaches to that.

I would like to thank particularly four organisations or individuals for agreeing to be core representatives today—namely, the Mid West Development Commission, the Shire Council of Meekatharra, David Priestley and, also, the Gascoyne Development Commission. I thank those four for giving us some baseline data for today.

ASMUSSEN, Dr V, (Private capacity)

BARRETT, Mr Carl David, Project Officer, Gascoyne Development Commission

BRINE, Mr Dominic Francis, Presenter, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio, Geraldton

BROOKS, Mr Robert Ross, Volunteer, State Emergency Service

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FOULKES-TAYLOR, Mr Harold Michael, Councillor and Delegate, Western Australian Municipal Association, Murchison Shire Council and Mid West Development Commission Communications Working Group

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HARRADINE, Miss Natasha, Journalist, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

HEALY, Ms Jackie, Senior Project Manager, Mid West Development Commission

KOWALD, Mr Robert Wayne, Councillor, Shire of Morawa

O'DWYER, Mr Brian Anthony, Deputy Shire President, Shire of Meekatharra

PRIESTLEY, Mr David, (Private capacity)

PRIOR, Mr David Jonathon, Manager, Batavia Coast FM

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SMITH, Mr Malcolm Robert, Group General Manager, Geraldton Newspapers Ltd and Batavia Coast Radio Pty Ltd

THOMPSON, Mr Reginald Paul, Regional Program Manager, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

WILKS, Mr Graham Stanley, Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Mullewa; and Chair, Mid West Communications Working Group

CHAIR—I ask Mr Priestley whether he would like to give us a five- to seven-minute overview of how he sees regional radio—the part it plays, its deficiencies—and how this committee might recommend to the government it be improved.

Mr PRIESTLEY—Thank you, Mr Chairman. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I submitted to this because of my long-time association with what we will call ‘the bush’ of Western Australia, in fact right around Western Australia and into the Northern Territory. I have been privileged to travel the whole of Western Australia and most of the Northern Territory as part of my work, and one of the things that always hits me is that when I get outside the range of the major towns—the Geraldtons, the Carnarvons, the Perth cities, the Albanys, the Esperances and the Kalgoorlies—there is virtually no radio. When I say ‘no radio’, I am talking daytime. There are many people in this room today who will back that. They will say that if they have a very good car radio they can hear. My argument is that we have to look at everybody and not just one small group of people.

For many years leading up to 1994 we had the stations VLW and VLX which were sent out of Perth, from the Wallaroo Road, Hamersley transmission site of the then Postmaster-General’s Department, and they were on 69 and 15 megs. They provided an excellent service to the bush on short wave. They were closed down, ostensibly for a two-month trial period, in 1994, and ‘we will let you know what is happening’. Like everything else, we are still waiting to hear. Basically, I think it was because the radio frequency radiation from that site was worrying people within a close proximity to the transmitting station. We know now a lot more about radio frequency and what it does to our health, and it is not terribly good. There is a lot of quite justifiable argument for the fact that that transmission site has closed down.

However, at the end of my submission to you I said, in effect, that to overcome the problems that we have at the moment—in simple words—is not going to be easy. I did say that we could set up a lot of high-power stations. We have one at Dalwallinu which is, I guess in round figures, 300 kilometres from here, and we have a big one down at Wagin over which you will be flying on your way to Albany. Those two stations are both 50-kilowatt transmitters in the AM band and they cover a fairly large portion of the southern half of the state. But if you are travelling around in the Carnarvon area and north—in fact if you go much more than 120 or so kilometres north or east of Geraldton and north from that point—you have no radio reception at all.

The thing that concerns me a lot is that there are many pastoralists eking out a living from the land. Some are doing okay; some are not. In the majority, they cannot afford to have power running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is expensive because they have to use diesel. There is a big switchover in lots of places to solar energy at the moment. However, that is in itself a \$30,000 to \$50,000 exercise in most places. Even with government help, it is simply not able to happen overnight. It is happening, but it is very slow. So these people have got to be looked after, as do Mr and Mrs Travelling Public. I suggested in my submission that, for people in Western Australia, reinstating the short wave transmitters could be looked at because the average \$120 radio with short wave facilities on it can pick up short wave.

At the moment, most people are tuning to the BBC. I guess it is fair to ask, ‘Why the BBC and not the ABC?’ That commercial stations cannot be received out there is a matter for the commercial stations to look at and to come to some arrangements. The ABC, which is our

federally funded national broadcaster, is one of those things that could be looked at in re-providing the service. It was an excellent service that was provided through VLW and VLX prior to January 1994.

That is the basis on which I stand here today. We have no radio. I could take you to parts out there where you will not get radio. Even at night, it is very difficult—and you are not a long way from civilisation. But there are people living out there who cannot get it. In other words, they are being deprived. I think that that is not good enough. I have people here from stations who will agree with that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Priestley. That gives us a comment on there being no radio. Would someone like to comment on the character of radio that you do have? Is it good enough? Is it comprehensive enough?

Mr O'DWYER—I am not going to go over all the points that David has brought up because they are exactly the same.

CHAIR—How far would you be from your nearest radio station?

Mr O'DWYER—The nearest radio station is in my lounge room if I turn the engine on and run 24-hour power and get it off the satellite dish through my decoder box. That is in the homestead. But it does not give me radio over in the shed. It does not give me radio outside if I am fixing a windmill or if I am fencing. I can rig up a car radio—if I can get a good one—I can get a 12-volt battery, I can run a big wire up a tree, I can run some wires around and put a speaker in the homestead so that the battery is not inside the house and I can get Dalwallinu ABC, which comes from Geraldton but through the Dalwallinu transmitter, which is about 150 miles north of Perth.

I live 600 miles north of Perth, so that is your problem. You can get FM radio in Meekatharra if you live within 12 or 15 miles out of town, but you cannot get it in the bush. You can get radio in your homestead if you have got a satellite dish and a decoder box, which costs you \$3,000 or thereabouts, and you can get TV as well, but that is only if you have 24-hour power. That is in your lounge room, not out in the flat. That is pretty relevant for the whole of the inland of Western Australia.

CHAIR—Did you listen to short wave when it was available?

Mr O'DWYER—Yes, I did. I have a letter here that was written to me and also one to the shire on 13 January 1994. Their reason for closing the transmitters was that they were starting to become obsolete—they were going to cost \$800,000 to replace. They did not actually belong to the ABC—they belonged to the Australian Broadcasting Authority at that stage. They were shut down for a two-month trial period. Of course, that was a bit of joke. It just went on from there despite all the protests from ourselves and the Pastoralists and Graziers Association, and there are members here today that were involved in that.

We went through all this rigmarole of them saying that they would give us a 50 megawatt transmitter somewhere up there that would service the requirements once they shut the short wave down. Here we are, seven years later, still waiting for that promise. At the Murchison

Ward conference of the Country Shire Councils Association in November last year, we brought this thing up again. The secretary of the ward wrote to the director to the ABC. We now have a letter back from the manager of the ABC in Western Australia to say that there is a possibility that there is a spare 50-megawatt transmitter in the Northern Territory that could be available.

After seven years, if this is at all feasible, this is where you people have got to get behind us and give us a bit of support. We cannot do it on our own; we are sick of it. That just gives you a bit of an update. I can give you the letter that I have got a copy of. The other thing is, we also sent an email to your committee in October of last year, and I would be very interested to know whether you actually received that email from the Meekatharra Shire Council.

CHAIR—Yes, it has been received.

Mr O'DWYER—Okay. You can get radio but you have got to—

Mr JULL—Brian, can you give us a rough indication of what population was covered by the old short wave transmissions? Was it a matter of tens, hundreds, thousands?

Mr O'DWYER—Jano Foulkes-Taylor would probably have a better idea than me, because she was involved in the communications part of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association. When we were complaining about it when it was first taken off, I was told by Tom Murrell, who was then the manager of ABC regional radio in Perth, that there were only about 200 people affected. That was a lot of nonsense; there were more than 200 pastoral people affected—never mind about prospectors, mines, Aboriginal communities.

Mr JULL—That is why I asked the question; you get these varying estimates on how many people use the service.

Mr O'DWYER—This is where it is all very difficult for the likes of we people addressing a committee of people like you that come from the other side. I have got a map here that I have had right back from 1994-95 that I can give you a look at—you are not going to get it because I want to keep it. It will show you the radius in which good transmission is coming out of Geraldton or Dalwallinu, and it will show you the big blank patch in the middle of Western Australia where there is nothing.

CHAIR—Could you give a copy of that to our secretariat?

Mr O'DWYER—I could do, yes. I can give you a look at it now so you have got a bit of an idea.

CHAIR—If it is an irregular size, take it to a surveyor or the engineering department of the council and get it copied and we will pay for it.

Mr O'DWYER—I think the Geraldton Mid West Development Commission could do the same thing. In 1996, the Bosche group did a communications audit on behalf of the minister for regional development in Western Australia.

CHAIR—Can we get a copy of that?

Mr O'DWYER—Jackie Healy should be able to give you a copy of that. It took 12 months to come out. It gave you all the reasons why we still did not have any decent radio, and the people that were involved, and nothing happens.

CHAIR—The state department is appearing before us tomorrow, so we might see if we can question them about that and find out what happened. Do you have some information about that?

Ms HEALY—I give apologies for Graham Baesjou, who is our CEO. I can address these issues on behalf of the commission.

CHAIR—Would you mind speaking for a few minutes to give us your view of it?

Ms HEALY—Basically our submission supports exactly what has been said here today. In 1994 the development commission, in conjunction with the Pastoralists and Graziers Association and the Country Women's Association, undertook a survey of the pastoral region, because we were concerned with reports that only 200 people were being impacted by the closure of the short wave service. Through our survey we found that a minimum of about 2,500 people were being impacted, possibly 3,500, and you have got to talk about tourists as well that travel through that region. I have lodged with Rachel a copy of that short wave report. I have also given her a copy of the mid-west communications strategy document and the Bosche communications report that was just mentioned then.

Those reports all talk about this issue with ABC radio service, or the lack of it, in the pastoral region. We were told back in 1994 that the satellite service would provide a viable alternative. It has not; it is a very limited service. As has been mentioned, it only really helps those people who live in the towns close to the satellite dish receivers and people in their homesteads when they can listen to the radio at home. It really does not service the travelling people or pastoralists when they are working outside of their homes, for various reasons. The coverage is not there, and they have to have 24-hour power to receive it. Another issue with the satellite service is that, for those people who live in close proximity to the towns where they can receive it, it is generated from Karratha, so it is not really a relevant service to the people of the mid-west region.

CHAIR—I can remember when the early transistors came out. They were very well made. The National transistors back in the sixties all had two bands of short wave on them as a matter of course, didn't they?

Mr JULL—Sorry to keep butting in, but I think you have raised a fairly good point. What you are saying to us is that, if you are driving the highways of Western Australia, half the time you cannot pick up anything, and that, if there are any emergency announcements or warnings that are to be given, nothing is available so you are driving blind.

Ms HEALY—There are no road reports, weather reports or cyclone warnings. In parts of this state you are very isolated in terms of radio.

Mr JULL—I hate getting on to statistics, but in terms of this business of about driving around Australia—and indeed the work that has been done in tourist promotions for the north-west—how many drivers or holiday-makers would you score annually in this part of the world? It must be a pretty substantial number.

Ms HEALY—I think the figures are about 94,000 tourists to this region each year. I could be wrong there but the Tourist Commission would have those details.

Mr JULL—I think you are right; I thought it was about 100,000 a year. So you have 100,000 people driving blind.

Ms HEALY—Also, as I said, there is the relevance of the service to those people in the towns that do pick it up. There has been a push for a Geraldton based service rather than a Karratha based service. I believe it is possible. There is the opportunity for an AM transmitter somewhere near Meekatharra, which would cover our area, but it would not help the north-west of the state. So there still is this problem that needs to be addressed for the pastoral region.

While I am talking about the commission's submission, I raise another point. For a long time the north midlands area of our region was without adequate commercial radio service. Again, they were getting a satellite service fed down from the north-west. That has changed now. The Australian Broadcasting Authority has granted a licence to Batavia Coast FM to cover that area with a Geraldton based service. That will be happening shortly. But we still have an anomaly with Kalbarri, which is just an hour and a half up the coast from Geraldton. It is still receiving a commercial service from the north-west. That will be the next town for which we will be applying for a special licence.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I do not know who would like to answer this question, but I would like to walk through this area by area, highway by highway, district by district, if I can. I am somebody from the other side of the country, but I am sure you will give me a good understanding of it. I would like to go through what was covered by short wave prior to 1994. Mr Priestley, would you know about it?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Approximately the whole of the Kalgoorlie electorate was covered by —

Mr HARDGRAVE—One-third of Australia, I suspect.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Approximately the whole of the Kalgoorlie electorate was covered by the VLW.

Mr HARDGRAVE—That is basically everything from north of here: Carnarvon, Karratha—everything, really, except for the south-west.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Everything outside the sou-west land division of Western Australia. The sou-west land division goes from about Kalbarri to Esperance.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Does that include Meekatharra?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—It certainly does, and a big heap of the Territory as well and north-west South Australia.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I want you all to be sure that this committee is having enough difficulty explaining to the Australian Broadcasting Authority, which is located in Sussex Street, Sydney, how things work in the outskirts of Sydney, so I want to walk through this very carefully because I want to try to get an understanding on the record. If you drive from Geraldton to Carnarvon there is no radio station for that whole distance—is that essentially correct?

Mr PRIESTLEY—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The same thing from Carnarvon to Exmouth?

Mr PRIESTLEY—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Everyone is saying yes to Karratha. There is a radio station in Karratha-Port Hedland, one would imagine.

Mr PRIESTLEY—There is one in Karratha and one at Port Hedland. They are about 800 kilometres apart.

Mr HARDGRAVE—For reference, Port Hedland is half way to the top of the state. It is exactly the same for Broome: you win a radio station and you lose a radio station along the way. Obviously, it is the same for Derby and Wyndham.

Mr O'DWYER—Just before you go on, I would like to make a point that nobody else has made. With short wave radio, you could get radio, uninterrupted by thunderstorms or by any other interference, day or night, at any time of the day. It would not matter how bad the thunderstorms were, you could still get your weather report, you could still get your road reports, you could still get everything. You cannot do that with AM radio. It does not matter how good it is, you are still not going to be able to do that with AM radio. That is just a point that needs to be made. With short wave radio you did not have the problem with electrical interference. We are talking about most of Western Australia which, in the summer time, is fairly prone to thunderstorms.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Absolutely. While you are on your feet, the question of radiation was raised at Wanneroo or wherever.

Mr O'DWYER—With that radiation thing, quite frankly, when those short wave transmitters were put in, it was all bush. As Perth grew, the big problem was that it was interfering with our city cousins' TV. That was the problem.

Mr HARDGRAVE—But, either way, would it have been a far more sensible measure to have brought them to beautiful downtown Geraldton, to Meekatharra or to somewhere like that; to have simply relocated the transmitters rather than shut them down?

Mr O'DWYER—It would have been a good idea, yes, but they told us that the transmitters were too old, that they were obsolete and that that could not be done.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Mr Chairman, I just want to qualify who 'they' were. Do we know who 'they' really were?

Mr O'DWYER—The ABC.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The National Transmission Agency, I think it would have been.

Mr O'DWYER—The National Transmission Agency, through the ABC.

Ms HEALY—I think the NTA owned the transmitters at the time.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The NTA own transmitters right around the country that the ABC use.

CHAIR—Everything you say today is being recorded. To help Hansard, would you please repeat your name as the microphone is handed from person to person?

Mr HARDGRAVE—That is why I am repeating comments.

Mr O'DWYER—Mr Chairman, just before I go on, there is still the same problem with the satellite dish: when you get a thunderstorm or heavy rain, there is no reception. So we are not out of the woods.

Ms HEALY—To reiterate, my understanding is that those short wave transmitters were owned by the National Transmission Agency at the time and that there was a maintenance issue. They were becoming obsolete and too expensive to replace or to maintain.

CHAIR—Could someone just fill me in on this Kalbarri problem. You say that it is about 150 kilometres north of here. Would it have sufficient population to support a station or will there need to be a retransmission from Geraldton or Carnarvon?

Ms HEALY—It would be retransmitted from Geraldton. It is close enough. It is part of the mid-west community. In fact, I thought somebody from the Shire of Northampton was going to be here today to talk about it. My understanding is that Kalbarri would be happy with a retransmission from Geraldton, and the local radio station has offered to do that. The solution is there, but it requires the Australian Broadcasting Authority to approve a new licence.

CHAIR—Is that both commercial and ABC, or is it a community station? What type of station will it be?

Ms HEALY—The radio station is in Geraldton, but it would be a service broadcast into Kalbarri from Geraldton.

CHAIR—A commercial one?

Ms HEALY—A commercial FM service.

CHAIR—Would Kalbarri have an ABC service?

Ms HEALY—I think Kalbarri gets the Karratha ABC service.

Mr HARDGRAVE—There are six stations, plus two information stations, at Geraldton, so Geraldton obviously has a pretty good radio service. What sort of service was it that was being provided by these two short wave stations? Was it the ABC out of Perth? Were you hearing ABC news, ABC programming and cricket out of Perth but nevertheless also getting weather information—if there was a cyclone warning or whatever? Is that the sort of thing, Mr Priestley?

Mr PRIESTLEY—I worked at the ABC for a long time, back in the sixties and early seventies, and we used to broadcast the VLW and VLX programs out of Perth. People who have been in the state a long time will remember that the call that was given was 6WF, 6WA, 6GN, 6GF and VLW and VLX. They were the various stations that we had at that time.

CHAIR—Did they have a generic regional program, or was it just a Perth service?

Mr PRIESTLEY—Only for the country hour. The country hour went off to another studio, and special weather reports went off to another studio. Generally, nearly everything that went out on VLW and VLX came from the studios of 6WF.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We are not pretending this was a beautiful quality reception; it was really scratch and hollow.

Mr PRIESTLEY—Yes, but it was radio. They felt needed; they felt as though somebody cared. I think that my colleagues here today are all saying that we feel as though we have been abandoned. In my submission, which I am sure you have read, I said:

These transmitters fed the signal into the remote areas of Western Australia and gave the pioneers of the state useable radio, principally from the 6WF studios in Perth.

I will just divert slightly from there. This was during the time that the north-west of Western Australia—Mount Newman, Hamersley, Mount Tom Price and Paraburdoo—was being opened up. I was in Gove in the Northern Territory when Cyclone Tracey wrecked Darwin. I had just gone up there to put in the television station. Because our local radio came from Darwin via tropospheric scatter link, we lost all radio. The PMG technicians at Gove gave me a line from an interception point in the telephone exchange to the local television station that I had been instrumental in bringing online only a few days before. We used those studios to keep the people of Gove informed. Our source of information was from the VLW and VLX transmitters from Perth. Our people here have made the point that a lot of our programming is coming from either Broome or from Karratha or from Geraldton. There seems to be quite a mismatch in amongst all of that too.

CHAIR—Can someone identify for me where the ABC stations are going up the coast from Perth?

Mr PRIESTLEY—Apart from Perth, there is Geraldton, which covers the mid-west region and quite a lot of the state; there is one at Karratha, which feeds into Geraldton and a couple of other FM transmitters which, I hasten to point out, have only a 20-kilometre radius; and then you have Broome studios. That is where the studios are.

Mr THOMPSON—There is one at Kununurra.

Mr PRIESTLEY—Paul Thompson is the local manager of the ABC here.

CHAIR—Paul, would you like to comment on the ABC service?

Mr THOMPSON—I am the regional program manager for the ABC in Geraldton.

CHAIR—I have spoken to you on the radio.

Mr THOMPSON—Indeed, on Friday morning. Thank you for taking the effort. To outline specifically the staffed stations; there is one at Geraldton; there is one at Karratha; there are two staffed stations associated with the Kimberley, the main one in Broome; and there is a single person. The studio is in his lounge room at Kununurra. That is about to be upgraded. There are just a couple of minor discrepancies in a sense. Each of the inland places that you are talking about—and not only inland but on the coast as well—these transmitters are satellite fed, including Kalbarri. The satellite fed stations come from Karratha.

Mr MOSSFIELD—How far is Karratha?

Mr THOMPSON—From here?

Mr MOSSFIELD—Yes.

Mr THOMPSON—About 1,700 kilometres.

Mr MOSSFIELD—A stone's throw!

Mr THOMPSON—A long drive in a day. The other towns like Yalgoo, Mount Magnet, Cue, Meekatharra and Wiluna are satellite-fed stations. Their natural link would be here, but the station is for financial reasons fed from Karratha, as are some odd places in the south like Ravensthorpe, which is way down south. You will wonder why that should happen, as everybody else does, but the reason is money. As a citizen, it just strikes me that one should say that, in 1994 when that short wave transmitter, VLW, was taken away, for some reason there was an emasculation of folk in the ABC and they did not stand up and say, 'If all that is the case, we must provide the individuals with another service: another short wave transmitter—something.' They did nothing. Despite my strong protestations—being an also-ran, in a sense, in the bush—those pleas were ignored, as were those of my friends on the right and the left who were not only used to it but found it vital. But there they were, mute, I am afraid.

I want to make one other point. The ABC provides a service at critical times: cyclones, floods, fires. The transmitters that provide that information are along the coast and invariably, if

the situation is critical, those transmitters go out. So in our submission from the Mid West Development Commission we suggested an inland, AM powerful transmitter which could be serviced from places other than on the coast where direct cyclones come from. That would be an invaluable security measure for those communities along the coast. So far that, too, has been ignored.

CHAIR—Where were you recommending that for?

Mr THOMPSON—I reckon somewhere around Meekatharra would be an ideal spot because there is three-phase power there. There are some technicians there who would be available to service the transmitter and so on, and Vodafone have their only other outfit there, so there would be suitable people there to maintain it. If it was of sufficient strength—if you could get a site as good as Dalwallinu or as powerful as Wagin—then I believe that would cover most of the coastal communities in the event of there being flooding on the coast due to a cyclone.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Mr Chair, I have some concerns about some of the evidence we have had—not here today but previously. I am looking at a map here called ‘ABC radio network coverage’. My colleagues might like to look at page 21 of our red books. According to this document, 100 per cent of the Western Australian population is covered by something called ‘local radio’—I am just telling you what is here—86 per cent of the Western Australian population is covered by ABC Classic FM; 94 per cent of the Western Australian population is covered by Radio National; 81 per cent of the Western Australian population or thereabouts is covered by Triple J; and 76 per cent of the Western Australian population is covered by News Radio, which would be basically metropolitan Perth. What concerns me is that on this map, quite clearly I think, there is a little line—it looks like it is Meekatharra—that is covered by local radio. We are now hearing that that is not the case, although I think 200 clicks outside—

Mr O'DWYER—I can tell you where that came from. I am also a pastoralist. In 1985, the ABA actually had a meeting in Meekatharra. I am quite convinced that, when they got back on their jet at the Meekatharra airport, they were totally of the opinion that all those little squares that are dotted all over inland Western Australia—they are pastoral station homesteads—were little towns of reasonable significance, that they had 24-hour power and that they might as well be living in the suburbs of Perth. I am totally convinced that they went away with that impression. I think that is where all that came from back in 1985.

CHAIR—Let us move on.

Mr SHARP—There is something I would be interested to know. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s you could get racing broadcasts all over Western Australia. You could get the eastern states racing. Having been in Bingara, around Barraba, in Tamworth and up and down the eastern coast, why is it that in Western Australia we get nothing but bloody football? You get football on every station. If the Indonesians landed up at Cape Leveque, where the hell are we going to get any coverage? ‘Dewdrop’ Thompson here has the right idea: if you can count the penguins or the seagulls every morning and you can tell us what is going on in Geraldton, why is it that we cannot get coverage in this area that is comparable with that in the eastern states? These gentlemen here who have travelled around various places could go and fish the dams over there and pick up anywhere in the world on short wave radio, yet in Western Australia we can't get 6PR in Geraldton, we can't get the racing radio in Geraldton and we can't get a result

in Geraldton. Is there a reason you could be down at the fishing harbour with an antenna and pick up the eastern states as clear as crystal?

CHAIR—We held an inquiry into that problem. Although the minister has not yet responded to it, he has attended to a number of the matters that we raised in the report. It was called—

Mr SHARP—The TAB report. You would have got a copy of the TAB report here in Western Australia. The dollars that have been spent off the TAB furnishing 6PR, Southern Cross Radio and other broadcasting stations. Is there any reason why the ABC in Geraldton—they must be going very poorly or have no money—do not want to put the racing on? We listen to their football. Now we have got you down to tintacks.

CHAIR—The ABC made a conscious decision to do that from their Sydney base. This committee held the inquiry into that and it was said that the national advisory committee was not even consulted.

Mr SHARP—That would be right. During elections here—we will give you an idea of what goes on in sin city—if you are an outsider in this town and have not been here since your coffin was prepared, you could not get on a local radio station. I was one of the candidates in this town. Out of 11 candidates, 10 got presentable air time and one did not. Guess who the one was? I am a professional stirrer. I carry a wooden spoon with me. Do I have to get the message over to you in Bingara or Tamworth or Barraba—where it is only one mining town, which would be asbestos, and you could drive around there and go fishing down in any dams; and you do not have to pick up a radio service? Could you explain that?

CHAIR—No, but I will arrange for you to get a copy of our radio racing report.

Mr SHARP—No, you have got it wrong. I am an ex-jockey, I am a horse trainer and I have travelled all over Australia. I do not need to know anything about racing. What I want to know is—

CHAIR—I just wanted you to know what we have done about the issue that you raised. We will send you a copy of our report so you will be able to see that this committee at least has not been dilatory in its activities.

Mr SHARP—If you were wearing blinkers we would not have any problem, would we? You have to remember this—

CHAIR—Do you have a TAB station here?

Mr SHARP—No—a TAB? A station here is only what you can pick up on a radio. You can be 100 miles out to sea and pick up the TAB—what they broadcast. You can be sitting in the middle of Geraldton—would you believe—and you cannot even get a result; you cannot even pick up the radio.

CHAIR—You did not answer my question. Do you have a TAB radio station? All the states have a TAB network.

Mr SHARP—Well, they have not.

CHAIR— Does Geraldton have a TAB station?

Mr SHARP—No.

CHAIR—Why not? There are 35,000 people, for God's sake.

Mr SHARP—They say there are not enough dollars—in this town the racing has gone backwards.

CHAIR—In western Queensland and western New South Wales, they put a transmitter on top of the TAB. You may not get great coverage—you might only get 10, 15 or 20 kilometres.

Mr SHARP—If you went into a TAB shop and listened to the races, why is it that—

Miss HARRADINE—We do actually get TAB here. It is 88.6 on the FM band.

Mr SHARP—Yes, but that is only for some people. Not everybody can pick that station up.

Miss HARRADINE—Why not, if their radios work?

Mr SHARP—Put it this way. Tony Delroy is on at 2 o'clock in the morning. Can you explain to me why I can listen to the short wave on the ABC radio station—which is normally Geraldton—and yet we can pick up more frequency listening to Indonesia, Singapore and across the country than we can to the ABC in Sydney?

CHAIR—This inquiry is not about what they call fortuitous coverage. Even on the east coast there are parts of Queensland where you can pick up Victorian radio stations and they are as clear as a bell. There are other parts of Australia where you will pick up Tasmania. There are atmospheric conditions, especially on AM, where you will get a lot of what they call fortuitous coverage. I cannot tell you about that. Our inquiry is to find out what is wrong with radio in regional and rural areas and what recommendations we can make to the government to correct them. I cannot explain to you all those eccentricities of radio in Western Australia—I am not familiar with them. I want to hear your recommendations to us. I want you to describe the problems and give us your recommendations to solve them.

Mr SHARP—You don't have any problem with the football broadcast, do you?

CHAIR—That is an internal thing for the ABC.

Mr SHARP—No, wait on. If you spend enough money, you can get football on any station you like. You have proved that with Packer, the Murdochs and anybody else. It does not matter who owns the radio stations. If you buy up every radio station in Australia and you do not want something on it, you do not have it. But the definition in this country is a fair go for everybody. On a 24-hour band, in Geraldton or anywhere else, surely you must be entitled to equilibrium.

CHAIR—We held an inquiry into this because a lot of people like you objected to the ABC taking off racing. The ABC held surveys about it after rather than before the event, and they did not refer it to their national advisory committee. However, the ABC only ever broadcast races on Saturdays, public holiday Mondays, Anzac Day afternoon and a few days like that. The TAB stations are now broadcasting seven days a week with 20 or 30 different racing services from across the country. Your problem is not the nature of the service; your problem is getting the delivery to the area.

If you want to challenge the ABC, that is not part of this inquiry. We are not going back over the racing thing again. I suggest you write a letter to Mr Thompson, which he would forward to Sydney or Perth, noting your objections. If you have friends who think that, you should get them to write to Mr Thompson. We are not going to go over that ground again today.

Mr SHARP—No, but not everybody likes racing. It would not matter whether you had basketball on or hoops; you must be entitled to equal opportunity.

CHAIR—The ABC have to make value judgments from time to time on what the most popular sport is at a given time and what most people want to listen to. In Queensland they would want to listen to rugby league or rugby union; here they would probably want to listen to Aussie rules. The ABC in each state has to make a value judgment on what sport to broadcast. I do not know whether surf carnivals are a big deal over here, but in parts of Queensland surf carnivals are a big deal. There is no one size fits all for radio in Australia. It is not a matter of equality; it is a matter of a value judgment made by the state or regional based ABC on what is required. In Victoria, for example, they have split their AM and FM transmitters and put out two football signals so that they can give people a choice. I do not want this to degenerate into a criticism of ABC programming; that is not what we are here for today.

Mr SHARP—No. We salute the ABC. But the trouble is that in Bendigo and Ballarat you can go around the miners or anywhere you like over there and you can pick up any station and get a varied program.

Mr MOSSFIELD—We have not heard from the commercials. I am sure there are some commercial operators here.

CHAIR—We have got a few people listed. I will come back to you if we have time. Jackie has spoken. Malcolm Smith?

Mr SMITH—I wonder if it would help this inquiry if I were to outline where we have come from and where we think we are at the moment with respect to broadening not only our appeal but our area of influence in broadcasting. I could go back a few years. The dilemma that is referred to by the ABA is that, instead of granting a section 39 licence to the then owners of 6GE, the AM station, they granted a group of shareholders another FM licence in this very small market. The result of that was that both of those companies became serious loss makers and continued to be, basically, until about 12 months ago.

A bit further back than three years ago the stations were amalgamated. Both licences were operated independently in different buildings until the amalgamation, and four years ago we amalgamated both the stations in one building. At that time we were transmitting at five

kilowatts—not really five kilowatts; we were licensed to transmit at ten kilowatts. We were actually only ever able, through the NTA, to transmit at about half that, 4.8 or 4.5, with the result that outlying areas, including the seven shires of the VROC group—and I will name them if you wish—were then excluded from Geraldton commercial radio.

CHAIR—What was the reason for that? Why wouldn't they let you broadcast to both?

Mr SMITH—The NTA, owners of the mast that we rented, simply said that there was not capacity in their equipment to allow us to broadcast at full power. Three years ago I was able to convince our board to build our own radio transmission mast and facilities and get off the NTA mast altogether. We did that and are now transmitting into the mid-west at 10 kilowatts, our full licence.

CHAIR—Is that on both stations?

Mr SMITH—Yes, we average about 8½ kilowatts or something like that. The range is still very limited. It is limited to probably the northern end of the town of Northampton, all of Dongara and bits of Mingenew, parts of Mullewa and so on. We mounted a very strong campaign with the ABA in Canberra to allow us to retransmit our signal into those seven shires. The seven shires are Morawa, Coorow, Mingenew, Perenjori, Carnamah-East Eneabba, Three Springs and Mullewa. For the very first time ever in radio in Australia, I am told, the ABA eventually relented and granted us permission to retransmit in AM from a site at Morawa.

CHAIR—Was that your original AM site?

Mr SMITH—No, our original AM site is here. When the FM licences were granted we suddenly had only a very limited range, as has happened everywhere else in Australia, but we have taken it as part of our responsibility to broadcast back into those seven shires. We have spent \$300,000. The mast was erected down there last Friday. As of 29 March or thereabouts, about 12,000 people in those seven shires will get the signal for 98.1 in AM on a frequency of 15.12 and it will be exactly the same signal as we broadcast here in Geraldton. So, for the very first time in six or seven years, people are now going to be able to tune in and get *Jukebox Saturday Night*. They will have three or four hours of sport on Saturday morning with Victor Tanti and they will have some local news. They will have local programming that we do here for music and, more particularly, they will be locked into—if they choose to dial us up—what is going on in Geraldton in a commercial sense. So they are going to have entertainment; they are going to have all sorts of commercial information.

CHAIR—Have you thought of applying for a retransmission facility further out, perhaps going towards Meekatharra or somewhere like that?

Mr SMITH—We have not, but that is not to say, with the precedent now set, that we cannot do that. My object perhaps in addressing you today is that probably more people live in Kalbarri than in any other regional centre. As the crow flies, Kalbarri is less than 100 kilometres away from here, but because Kalbarri—and people live at Kalbarri—is at the bottom of a gorge, which is the mouth of the Murchison River, our commercial FM station does not quite drop into the gorge.

CHAIR—What is the population of Kalbarri?

Mr SMITH—It is about 3,500. We now have a petition signed by 300 people from Kalbarri who are demanding that we do what we have done in Morawa, and that is to put a small redirection transmitter on the brow of the gorge and drop our signal straight out of Geraldton—in FM—straight into Kalbarri.

CHAIR—What does the ABC do there? Do you drop straight in like that?

Mr THOMPSON—From Karratha.

CHAIR—No, what form of retransmission—

Mr THOMPSON—I am sorry—satellite set.

CHAIR—Yes, but I thought I heard you say you had a retransmission facility at Kalbarri.

Mr THOMPSON—We do.

CHAIR—Is it the same idea that Mr Smith is talking about now—do you drop it into the gorge?

Mr THOMPSON—I am not sure how he is going to get it there.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What has the ABA determined that this market be called? Will it be the Geraldton market, the regional Western Australian market or the remote market, or is it called the anything-but-Perth market? What is it called?

Mr SMITH—I have no idea. We refer to ourselves as the Geraldton market, but now that the Morawa facility is up and running it will be a mid-west regional radio service.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What I am trying to drive at is how the ABA treats this. If they have a Geraldton market and a Karratha market, what is your licence to transmit—

Mr SMITH—The reason we were granted permission to do this was on the basis that the current satellite service broadcast out of Karratha into Geraldton and into this region was manifestly inadequate to service the population in the whole region.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Are you saying that, according to the ABA, Geraldton and Karratha—which are hundreds and hundreds of kilometres apart—are in the same market?

Mr SMITH—No, we are not saying that at all. We are saying that WAFM, which is the Western Australian satellite service—or commercial service, if you like—is transmitted out of Bunbury. Their programming originates out of Karratha, and that is satellite linked out of Bunbury.

Mr HARDGRAVE—In the Northern Territory there are aspirations to creep a Darwin station into Katherine and maybe into Tennant Creek. On what basis can that be done? In the case of Brisbane the ABA has drawn a line on the map that says—and I do not know if you know Brisbane especially well—that Brisbane is in one market and Ipswich, which is like the house next door, is in another market. Sydney has the same thing. They can draw lines around major metro areas. But it strikes me that the mid-west and the north-west should be a licence area and that, as a station, you should be able to transmit or retransmit, if you so choose, without having to go through the ABA bureaucracy. This is just an idea that is floating around.

Mr SMITH—As the rules are, that is not possible.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So you are telling me—

CHAIR—Especially in the Northern Territory, as Mr Hardgrave said, a special licence for situations like yours?

Mr HARDGRAVE—I suppose there is not exactly a queue of people using the frequency around Meekatharra, is there?

Mr SMITH—No, there is not. I think that, fortuitously, Meekatharra and all those areas lying even further out are probably going to get Geraldton FM, transmitted at five kilowatts in AM.

Mr HARDGRAVE—You are on 10 kilowatts with your new configuration, and yet ABC FM transmissions in Brisbane, for instance, are on 50,000 kilowatts.

Mr SMITH—I am sorry; I think I have misled you. We are on 10 kilowatts out of Geraldton and five kilowatts out of Morawa—or we will be at the end of the month.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Is there any ambition to scale it up? Is there any way that you could scale it up?

Mr SMITH—It will always be possible, but we would need retransmission facilities at Meekatharra. However, the audience comprises a couple of kangaroos and a couple of hundred people, which commercially does not make any sense.

Mr HARDGRAVE—And one councillor, one deputy mayor and one pastoralist. Is there is a case for saying, ‘Look, here is a radio operator who is producing information and entertainment connectivity,’ if you like, ‘for their community’? The problem is that there is a real cost impediment to them taking that content and retransmitting it elsewhere.

Mr SMITH—Yes, of course there is.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So if it is a dollar question to load in under some sort of community obligation on the part of the government—the Northern Territory government do it; they actually put money on the table to help community radio stations—is the government therefore obliged, while not controlling you, to simply say, ‘We want you to provide this service to the

kangaroos, the pastoralists and so forth and, because we know it costs you more, we will put some money in to help you along'?

Mr SMITH—That may well be the case. Commercially it does not stand up. If the government could be convinced to do so in this climate, good-oh. We have expended \$300,000 to increase our audience by 25 per cent in the belief that a proportion of local and national advertising will offset that \$300,000 over the life of this new mast, which might be another 25 years.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What is the likelihood of that?

Mr SMITH—We'll see.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Slide rule stuff?

Mr SMITH—It could be very slow, but it will be a 10-year pay-back. 'So what?' you might say. We had put a proposition to the seven councils involved to subsidise the service. Some said they would, some said they wouldn't and some said they would and then they didn't. So in the end we said, 'Bugger it. Let's just do it. Let's provide the very best local commercial service that we can and we are'. And we say to this inquiry: the most logical next step should be to annex, if you like, the Kalbarri audience. They are closer by road now than they ever have been, because of the coastal road, and they are a bigger population with probably more affiliation and associations with Geraldton than anywhere else.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I take it the council around Meekatharra is not one of those seven councils?

Mr SMITH—No. It is outside the VROC group.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Would you be open to any suggestion?

Mr SMITH—We absolutely would.

Mr HARDGRAVE—It would be further off for the pastoralists here—

Mr SMITH—Yes.

Mr St CLAIR—If you put an AM retransmissions centre out at Meekatharra, would that go out to Wiluna, for example? How far is that roughly?

Mr THOMPSON—About 120 kilometres.

Mr St CLAIR—So it would not go that far?

Mr SMITH—It would depend, again, on the size of the transmitters that you are using. In AM you would probably get to Alice Springs at 10 kilowatts.

Mr St CLAIR—Is it right that there are seven stations here in Geraldton—828, 95.1, 108, 88, 96.5, 98.1, 98.9—and the TAB station?

Mr SMITH—Yes, that includes the community stations here. Three are the ABC, and so on.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I would like to get a broad view of new technology and whether that would help overcome the problems of isolation we have been talking about. I know you have expressed some strong views on the fact that satellite transmitted digital radio is inappropriate, but could there be some sort of government support financially? Would that overcome some of the problems you see with satellite digital radio? Is there any support for that new technology?

Mr SMITH—One of the reasons we were granted this licence was the manifestly inadequate service provided by WAFM out of Karratha. There is absolutely no interest—in fact, there is even hostility in some of these towns—when WAFM are broadcasting advertisements and information about butcher shops and heaven knows what in towns that are 2,000 kilometres away. The technology will improve, no doubt. What we are talking about here is offering localism and trying to be a little more relevant to the people in our immediate area. I am sure the technology could change everything. I do not think that is what we are trying to do.

Mr MOSSFIELD—But we are trying to bring localism—

Mr SMITH—No, and that is where the money is, quite frankly.

CHAIR—Mr Kowald, could you give us your view on the new AM transmitter you are getting in your area.

Mr KOWALD—Would you like me to give a little preamble on Morawa?

CHAIR—Not particularly. We only have an hour left and I want to give everyone a chance to speak. I think we understand the dynamic of the area. What we want to know is how we fix it.

Mr KOWALD—It is partially going to be fixed by the introduction of 98.1 into our area. While we welcome it—who wouldn't?—the movement of AM into the area does not contain any rock and roll. I grew up in the rock and roll era, so did 300 other people, and I have got a petition from the people of Morawa.

CHAIR—I know where you are coming from, but, as Malcolm explained, the traditional way that these stations developed under licence s.39 was that if you had the local AM station you got a supplementary licence to provide one of these rock and roll type stations or hot FMs or whatever you like to call them. What Malcolm said is that he has convinced the ABA to let them reintroduce an AM—and the AM does not have that same quality of sound that an FM has—to put the basic service back. I suppose it is up to you guys, but I do not think we can be too critical at this stage when they have not got the AM switched on yet.

Mr KOWALD—No, I am not being critical—don't get me wrong. We all know in this area that 98.1 does not contain rock and roll. It is a quiet—

CHAIR—A beautiful music station.

Mr KOWALD—It is, especially on Saturday night with Jukebox! There are other points I will bring forward. One is that for the current FM licence for Morawa, Perenjori—we all have our own transmitters—the public banded together. WAFM does not put a red cent into our area for this transmission and the radio signal is totally irrelevant. The people are angry, and I can prove it.

CHAIR—Is it a rock and roll type station?

Mr KOWALD—No, it is a bit of everything. It even has that terrible stuff that we call talking music—rap. People just walk away.

Mr St CLAIR—Absolutely.

Mr KOWALD—Very few people are listening to WAFM in Morawa. You may have seen my written submission. They have had access to a signal and they are determined to achieve this. I contacted Bruce Flood at the ABA and his statement was that, if the ABA allowed the introduction of another FM service into the Morawa area, the current FM licence holder would suffer financially. I said, ‘Rubbish. Nobody advertises with it anyway, hardly anybody listens to it, so how can they suffer financially?’ This guy gave me the fob, pretty well.

CHAIR—Malcolm, I presume the beautiful music version will go out on AM. Is that where you do most of you localism, your community announcements?

Mr SMITH—Just about all of it. That is where we do our talk, it is where we will do political stuff when it comes up, it is where we will do the sports program on Saturday morning. If we do a kids program here, they program the station once a week.

CHAIR—Robert, that is by and large what happens around Australia. The original AM station—in your case, the reintroduced AM station or the FM station that has replaced it—generally does the localism: the community announcements, the talkback and all those sorts of things. I understand what you are saying about how you would like to have the choice of music as well. We will take on board what you say but I think it will be up to your local station to decide that. I think their priority might be—if we can convince the government perhaps to create some sort of zonal licence area—to get out to Meekatharra or somewhere and get up another transmitter there before they went back and started to do the rock-and-roll stations. Do you know what I am saying?

Mr KOWALD—Yes, I do. I have a final request before I sit down. Would the committee please consider approaching the ABA to relicence WAFM to our area and grant the licence to the shire of Morawa who applied for a licence and got a flat no—an absolute no. They would not even consider it. They never even had the fortitude to send back the licence application.

Mr MOSSFIELD—In your presentation you made some reference to the self-funding program where a number of people have made a financial contribution. Could you expand on that and give the committee some background?

Mr KOWALD—Yes. We have our own dish now.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Who is ‘we’?

Mr KOWALD—The shire. We call it the public, but it had to go through the shire in those days to get the sales tax off so that it was exempt. That is why it had to go through the shire. We have got our own satellite dish decoder, seatainer and transmitter. It was about 25 grand. They raised \$20,000. There is about 5,000 outstanding, but that is the way it goes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—What, in effect, has that achieved? Do you then allow some ABC or other radio stations to be transmitted through your shire?

Mr KOWALD—No, you are not allowed to. WAFM have got the sole rights to transmit into Morawa. Nobody else has, apart from AM.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So just one radio station is using those facilities?

Mr KOWALD—That is correct. They had a brief opportunity—and they took it—to hear the radio station of their choice, but it was fairly brief.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Do you have any comments relating to the ABA and what sorts of changes should be made to make them a bit more responsive to the concerns you have been expressing? You have said they have just about fobbed you off on occasions.

Mr KOWALD—I would suggest listening to the people and granting the people what they want to hear.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Okay.

Mr WILKS—Before her departure, Jackie Healy referred to the communications working group strategy. I hope you manage to get a copy of that, because that was done in about 1998 and identified a number of communication issues across this region. The region is fairly large, as you can imagine, and goes all the way through Wiluna to the South Australia-Northern Territory border. It covers two radio areas and both of those fortuitously have actually come up: the pastoral matter, which I think you have probably had a fair bit on, and what Malcolm Smith was talking about—commercial radio.

I want to take a couple of minutes to support what Mr Kowald was saying. He was talking about WAFM. That is a satellite based service. It is now out of Karratha and was formerly out of Bunbury. They tend to buy programming time from somewhere. The licence has been sold on to Karratha. But to get that signal virtually off the coast you have to have a retransmission dish within your local community. In the case of Morawa, Perenjori and Three Springs out in the north midlands, as we tend to call it, each of those communities has had to put up somewhere in the region of \$25,000 to actually pull that in. That then gives them a limited coverage; probably 10 to 15 kilometres around the town it goes out of FM mode.

If you do not have that facility and your community does not put the money up, you do not have any commercial radio coverage. I come from Mullewa, which is 100 kilometres inland. Because we are outside a licensed area, even in spite of the increased 10-kilowatt retransmission out of Geraldton, we fortuitously happen to pick up FM coverage, but we are not licensed to have it. The councils in the North Midlands region have got together and supported a commercial broadcaster. That freed up the mechanism in terms of the ABA.

I suggest that the committee may like to look at ensuring that the ABA is more flexible, less rigid and more understanding of communities and communities of interest. As you have also heard with WAFM, a Karratha based signal, they certainly would have objected—and I would have thought strongly—to a commercial broadcaster coming in and any consideration of the issue of a licence. That has been an ongoing issue up here. In spite of those seven local government authorities seeking to put petitions and other matters before the ABA, it is only in recent times that it has become considerate to that matter. I would suggest that the Geraldton commercial stations would have expended considerable funds not only in seeking to put up towers and otherwise but also in making representations to the ABA on such matters.

The difficulty is that if we continue to focus on pastoral areas—and that is quite appropriate in times of emergency and even just basic safety and other matters—we tend to lose sight of the fact that there are broad based agricultural communities not too far in distance from Geraldton and Perth that have difficulties receiving radio, especially commercial radio. They are certainly well covered by the ABC. The ABC out of Geraldton covers 44 shires in this state—it is a huge area—probably on a shoestring; that is, on 8c a day and all of that with a couple of staff. Commercial radio is very limited unless you put your hand in your pocket and you run lamington drives and chook raffles and all of those sorts of things, because that is really what it has come down to for communities up here. The strength is that you have somebody who has decided to put it up for nothing, hoping to get some money out of it.

Mr JULL—My understanding is that any attempt to establish community stations here has not been successful mainly because you just cannot get the finance.

Mr WILKS—It would be difficult for me to talk about a coastal location but I would say, rurally and inland, there would be some difficulty. We just do not have the critical mass of people even to be able to run those sorts of things and get the finance and other things. What we would certainly be looking at is somebody coming in and being prepared to retransmit a commercial signal—clearly, in AM mode—but being prepared is not enough. We have had that out of Karratha. We have had that in other places. They have to be prepared to commit to having some commonality of interest and putting some local network and content in.

The Geraldton case into this region got up on the basis that they were prepared to put in those sorts of spots, to do a regional roundabout and to be out there talking to people and putting that commonality of interest. I can assure you that, if that were not the case, the communities would not have been so inclined to listen and would have bypassed for the rock-and-roll cum rap or wherever you could have it out of Perth. Currently, certainly through the ABC, we are well serviced with that sort of regional roundabout and other things. We do need it in FM mode, particularly for the younger people whom we are having difficulty holding, because some of the radio markets just do not appeal to them.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I refer to a couple of things you have just said. With the community of interest argument, who will you have to put that to? Will you have to convince the ABA that there was some reason for the magnificent seven to get together? Did the ABA have to be convinced that there was a community of interest in what are seven contiguous shires in the same region of this remote state of Western Australia?

Mr WILKS—That was certainly the case. There is an exclusivity arrangement with the satellite transmission through WAFM. I think it goes back—and you can ask the state people when you meet with them tomorrow—to them giving a monopoly to the satellite transmitters.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The ABA gave a monopoly?

Mr WILKS—The ABA, in conjunction with the state. In order to get the satellite time up in the air, my understanding is that they said you could transmit or broadcast to the state of Western Australia outside of the dedicated licence area. For this region to have another licence underlying that, or over the top, it had to convince the ABA that it was in the interests of those people who presumably would have had to convince the ABA that it was not going to severely financially impact upon the WAFM. Mr Smith, who went through the exercise, could probably better talk to you, but I know there was some great difficulty with the ABA saying we wanted a commercial licence within the region.

CHAIR—I suppose, in its day, it was considered a good compromise, but from what we have heard in Darwin and from what we have heard from you today and what Malcolm Smith's model appears to be working towards, would it be better for us to recommend to the ABA some form of regional licence that would allow each region of the state to have some relevance in its own area?

Mr WILKS—Absolutely.

CHAIR—Could I have an indication from the people here whether that would be your preferred model? Could I have a show of hands? Who would prefer the current model coming up at Karratha—no hands—and who would prefer a regional licence—about five hands out of 20.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We still have a problem here because the ABA have obviously let a remote licence to somebody to broadcast this Western Australia FM and they would have a natural injustice done to them. That would be what is occurring here, I think. There was a big deal created in slicing this valuable part of that market for a remote licence and putting some competition in. One would then imagine, as we were trying to discuss before, that nearby we have Meekatharra where the case is being put that there is a no-radio zone there and that that, in itself, would also retard that remote licence as well. Yet the remote licence is not actually servicing those areas because it just simply is not from what everybody has been saying to us. We have this awkward circumstance where the ABA have lines on a map and have said that that has coverage but, in fact, it does not have coverage at all if no-one is receiving it. That seems to me to be what is occurring here.

CHAIR—Those who are receiving it are antagonistic towards it.

Mr HARDGRAVE—They want a choice and they are not getting a choice.

Mr WILKS—That remote licence—the WAFM Karratha based signal—is only available to those who put up the retransmission facility. What we are really saying is that anybody, such as Mr Smith or others, who feel like they want to go into those areas should be encouraged to do so. I should also say that the WAFM signal, which is a \$25,000 self-help facility in a seatainer sitting in Morawa, will still continue to receive that signal in FM mode. They will also then pick up fortuitously an AM signal based in Geraldton. They are quite lucky, in addition to the ABC, because some of those communities will not have that FM signal. They are fortunate, but they paid hard dollars to do it.

Mr JULL—I suppose this could be regarded as a naive question. Do the ABA ever visit this area, or is your correspondence and approaches with them purely by mail or similar circumstances? Has anybody in the ABA been here with a transistor radio and had a listen?

Mr WILKS—Yes, they have. The ABA was here probably five years ago and held a number of public inquiries very similar to what you are doing today fortunately. They received representations—and Michael Foulkes-Taylor informs me, also from Meekatharra—in that regard. Firstly, they have certainly been here and they certainly have had heavy duty submissions from within this region to convince them to modify their stand, but they have been on the ground.

Mr JULL—But they have not been back in five years?

Mr WILKS—Not to my knowledge. Others more learned may know.

Mr JULL—Nothing has been advanced either. The observations made five years ago have not been advanced any further by the ABA. People are shaking their heads, no. Thank you.

CHAIR—Mr Foulkes-Taylor, thank you for your patience.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—When the ABA were in Meekatharra and we met with them, their self-imposed terms of reference were so binding that they did not want to talk to us about anything that was not straight down the middle. They were pretty good at holding that line. Most of the people who actually attended the inquiry in Meekatharra flew or drove an average of 250-300 kilometres, I suppose, to get there—if you take the 500 and 600 kilometre trips and the 80 or 90 kilometre trips. We bent over backwards because we were familiar with—

CHAIR—You did not find the ABA very receptive?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Absolutely not. While I am just sitting here, am I allowed to raise a couple of things?

CHAIR—Yes, sure.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—The survey for closing down VLW was absolutely flawed inasmuch as they asked the people listening, over a period of about a fortnight, to ring in

and tell everybody that it was a good idea. They even gave the telephone number to ring in. Ninety per cent of the people who were listening to VLW in those days probably could not ring in—that is, the people who had to listen to VLW—because they were on the Flying Doctor anyway, or they were travelling through the country in caravans or long distance trucks and things like that and were not likely to. Nobody from the very large Aboriginal communities around the place was going to ring in. Of course, the alternative was to write, but they were not going to write either. When the mid west communications working group with friends did their survey afterwards, the 250 people that the original survey had said listened to VLW straight away went to 2,500 pastoralists alone, and that did not include all the travelling public and the other people who were listening to it. So it was a sham.

CHAIR—Do you agree with that figure of 2,500 to 3,000?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—The 2,500 to 3,000 were pastoralists that the mid west communications working group identified as having been VLW listeners. It did not include all the millions of little mining camps and all those sorts of things that were still involved. A lot of the Aboriginal communities that obviously listened to it were not involved. The sum total of that is that people are sick and tired of listening to Slim Dusty tapes over and over again—

Mr HARDGRAVE—He has got a new record.

Mr St CLAIR—He has got a new album now.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—because from 1994 that is what they have been listening to.

CHAIR—*Looking forward, looking back.*

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—You are up with it. Just quickly, on an AM station in Meekatharra, which could only really ever be ABC because the population is so small in the area for the possible radius that they are looking at, I do not think that anybody else would be interested. But it does not answer the point that the Meekatharra shire brought up here and that is: if the radius is no good, it is not going to bring in all these other things. It is no good throwing Meekatharra into the same story as Kalbarri. Kalbarri has a population of 3,500 or something, which is a self-generating thing in Western Australia; it is big enough to almost look after itself. The Meekatharras, the Wilunas, the Sandstones and goodness knows what in this part of the world are very low in population.

Mr St CLAIR—Roughly how big are these towns?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Meekatharra is really big.

Mr O'DWYER—The population of Meekatharra with the town, the pastoralists and the mining is about 1,800.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Yes, it is 1,800. But, if you go to Yalgoo, probably 400 would knock it on the head, no trouble at all.

CHAIR—If you drew a radius around from Wiluna using Meekatharra as your centre point, what would you cover there—5,000, 6,000 or 7,000 people?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—I very much doubt it, even with the mining set-up there.

CHAIR—Say a 150-kilometre radius of Meekatharra? What do you reckon, Malcolm?

Mr SMITH—We have a circle in the brochure. The area within that circle of broadcasts will deliver a shade under 12,000 people in total—about 11,600.

CHAIR—But what I am asking you is: if you put a subsidiary AM up at Meekatharra with another circle up around that, what would you pick up under that second—

Mr SMITH—Another 4½ to 5,000.

CHAIR—Okay. Back to Mr Foulkes-Taylor.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—I would like to finish on a slightly lighter note. In the State Communications Advisory Committee submission to you people—which you have, I hope, and are going to read very closely—they make a quotable quote that non-metro Western Australia has 2½ per cent of Australia's population and produces 26 per cent of Australia's export income. So we are not talking about small bickies; we are talking about people who are keeping Australia afloat.

CHAIR—Very productive people.

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—Some of them are.

CHAIR—I did not mean it that way.

Mr HARDGRAVE—How many people work here?

Councillor FOULKES-TAYLOR—What I am trying to say is that we have the same old golden triangle problem. Most of the people you talk about in Western Australia up in the bush reckon you have enough trouble talking to Perth. Heaven help us when we start talking to a House standing committee, but you look like pretty intelligent fellas to me! Thank you.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We had a similar view everywhere else north.

Mr JULL—Possibly because the committee is Queensland heavy.

CHAIR—Noel Sharp and David Prior are the next two speakers.

Mr PRIOR—For the record, I would like to briefly address the programming aspect of 98FM to perhaps allay a few fears.

CHAIR—You are the only meeting that has not complained about programming, I might add, other than this satellite circuit—

Mr PRIOR—It has been three years since 98FM has been a beautiful music station. I think they will be pleasantly surprised that it is what we call adult contemporary gold, which means it plays the best of today's music without going too heavy and all the old hits of the past from the sixties, seventies and eighties. So it is very broad. There are three hours of talk a day; four hours of sport on the weekend; the local footie, which will be extended to include all the results from those areas that we are—

CHAIR—While you are on your feet and talking about this, what do you take on relay or network?

Mr PRIOR—The only relay we take is the John Laws show.

CHAIR—For how long each day?

Mr PRIOR—We take three hours of that at the moment. We were taking an hour out of Perth of Paul Murray's show, but that sort of—

CHAIR—What time?

Mr PRIOR—Nine to 12.

CHAIR—You take Laws from nine to 12?

Mr PRIOR—Yes. We turn it around because of the time difference.

CHAIR—And what about Murray? What time do you take him?

Mr PRIOR—We were taking him between nine and 10 o'clock, but that got fairly untenable because of the commercial aspects that Murray was putting in his program out of Perth that were not relevant to what we were doing here.

CHAIR—Do you find any local desire to have an hour of local talkback?

Mr PRIOR—We are actually looking at doing that at the moment, perhaps on Fridays.

CHAIR—I am not suggesting to you that you cut out Laws. I have been accused in the media of trying to remove some of these talkback shows and nothing could be further from the truth: it is not that we love Caesar less but that we love Rome more. What are you doing for Geraldton in terms of letting the local expression on issues bubble through radio?

Mr PRIOR—We are looking at taking some of that Laws time to do it locally. There are two problems that come with that. One is the fact that we have found there are only a certain number of people who will participate in talkback. We would probably not get any more than an hour a week out of it before it got repetitive and boring with the same people pushing the same

barrows. One of the other things we will be doing for the group is that at least once a year we will be going to each of these markets and doing what we call a focus on the town where we involve the town and the radio station for a week and talk about the history—

CHAIR—You will do an OB from that town?

Mr PRIOR—We will do an OB from there. We will run little history segments on the towns. It is a ‘feel good’ thing for everyone, particularly to make those towns feel part of the area.

CHAIR—Do you do OBs at the local show?

Mr PRIOR—Telstra have almost made that impossible. It is very expensive to do a broadcast these days. We do a lot of live coverage where we will go out with mobile phones.

CHAIR—You do not mind me throwing these questions at you?

Mr PRIOR—No.

CHAIR—How many journalists do you employ, or do you use the paper’s journalists?

Mr PRIOR—We use the newspaper for that.

CHAIR—Do they write the scripts for you or do you have to rescript them at the radio station?

Mr PRIOR—They would be rescripted for radio talk.

CHAIR—At the newspaper or at the station?

Mr PRIOR—At the newspaper. If we have local elections, for instance, we will have specialised programs brought in to do that coverage over that time.

CHAIR—I want you to touch on another thing. Where we have been around the rest of Australia we have had a lot of criticism regarding emergency service broadcasting on the commercial channels—not so much with the ABC but with the commercial stations—largely because of networking, with people are not able to break into programming that is coming from the hub. Do you have a very strict protocol here on how you break in if there is a bushfire or cyclone or whatever it might be?

Mr PRIOR—We are not on network, apart from the John Laws show, and we have people on duty at that time anyway. Ours is computer generated so we can break in any time we want to—we can just walk in.

CHAIR—But you are not live all day?

Mr PRIOR—No, it is not live all day, it is on computer. But we have got someone around the place all day who can just walk in, touch a button and go live.

CHAIR—How much is live and how much is prerecorded?

Mr PRIOR—The breakfast session is live every morning. There are live bits throughout the day and there are other areas when—

CHAIR—What about your midday session?

Mr PRIOR—Midday is live.

CHAIR—Drive time?

Mr PRIOR—No, recorded.

CHAIR—Evening program?

Mr PRIOR—That is recorded.

CHAIR—Do you take any outside broadcasts from midnight to dawn?

Mr PRIOR—No, it is all generated locally.

CHAIR—Do you buy in any of the rock-and-roll shows?

Mr PRIOR—There are the weekly countdowns and that sort of thing, yes—the top 30 and that type of thing on the weekend.

Mr MOSSFIELD—What about ownership?

Mr PRIOR—Locally owned—local shareholders.

Mr JULL—How many announcers?

Mr PRIOR—Between the two stations there are eight announcers. Because we use computers and automation, those announcers all double up and do other jobs, so it means that we can actually run the station. We have not had to close it down like some have to.

CHAIR—Do the radio station and the newspaper run separate sales teams?

Mr PRIOR—Certainly—very competitive separate sales teams.

Mr St CLAIR—Do you have a local emergency management plan here for the council? Is there a local emergency management plan, and are the stations part of that?

Mr THOMPSON—Mine certainly is.

Mr St CLAIR—That is the ABC.

CHAIR—Have we got any councillors here?

Mr ROBB—I would like to leave that to the experts. I am not fully aware of that situation.

CHAIR—Don't think I am being smart about this, but this is a big worry to us. This is not an issue we thought we would find, but, wherever we go in Australia, there is this weak link in emergency services getting through radio. It is taken for granted that there are protocols, it is taken for granted that the ABC and commercial stations are part of the emergency service network, but we have found very few places where that works well.

Mr THOMPSON—I can assure you that emergency services in this part of the world work well. We have a master controller in Perth who has an instant ability to communicate, if not with me then with the second, third and fourth individual in the station. I can give you the example of 1988 when the Greenough River flooded, and when it has done it subsequently, when we went on locally. You have heard about the Moora flood. Again, we broadcast from midnight to dawn, as well as throughout the day. Believe me, for the ABC, the protocols for emergencies in the mid-western wheat belt and, indeed, in the entire north-west coast with cyclones is well oiled. I think we have had four cyclones this year already. So please do not lose sleep over protocols for emergencies as far as the ABC is concerned. We are ready.

Mr St CLAIR—Excellent, but we had to ask.

Mr PRIESTLEY—What Mr Thompson is saying is perfectly correct, except in the case of Carnarvon. Carnarvon is fed directly from Karratha. It comes down in the satellite and then it comes from the satellite down through cables to the transmitter. If we lose our ABC transmitter in Carnarvon, we have no ABC radio. We get blank radio.

CHAIR—You do not have a local radio station?

Mr PRIESTLEY—We do have a local radio station. I was just coming to that. It is run by Yamatji Media Pty Ltd. It is an Aboriginal owned and run station. We have access to that, and they also have power. Basically what Mr Thompson is saying is correct, but there are some places, such as Carnarvon, where, if we were to lose our link with Karratha, we would be off the air completely from the ABC. The ABC is the best source of any information throughout Western Australia.

CHAIR—I do not doubt that the ABC has a very good set up, and I said that earlier. What happens if there is a flash flood or a bushfire gets out of control at 11 o'clock at night and one of Malcom's reporters hears about it? How does the local network flick into gear? Who lets Mr Thompson know and who lets the shire council know to get this broadcast out?

Mr BROOKS—I am a volunteer in the SES, and I also work in the mining industry. The police come to the SES and call us out. I have no problem whatsoever with ABC's control and that sort of thing. However, I do have a problem with the fact that the ABC just does not have the coverage. Last year I drove from here to Meekatharra six or seven times.

CHAIR—How far is that?

Mr BROOKS—About 540 kilometres—about seven hours. For a large slice of that trip, there was no coverage. Most of that time when I was at Meekatharra I was staying at the Bluebird camp, which you would be familiar with. There are 100 people, but no coverage. In other camps in the area, there are 100 people, 50 people or 80 people, but no coverage. An interesting one on the technology side is that on one camp north-west of Meekatharra, we were able to pick up Imparja from Alice Springs, although we were told that if we continued to do so we could be fined.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Therefore, there continues to be a case for a whopping ABC transmitter somewhere around Newman to cover basically everything? Everybody is thumbs up on that.

Mr BROOKS—That would be excellent.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We are looking at something like a 50,000 or probably even a 100,000-kilowatt type transmitter—one that will make Newman glow in the dark, if necessary, to get it out.

Mr THOMPSON—I am really surprised, I must say, to hear that. I have driven many times to Meekatharra in my Ford Futura with a standard radio, and I can monitor my station without gaps. I do not know quite why that would happen. That is using 531, the Dalwallinu AM transmitter.

Mr BROOKS—On those trips, I used several vehicles—two belonged to me and several belonged to mining companies. On one or two I could get very feeble response in some places and none in other places. On some I would get a little bit here and a little bit there. It depends very much on the quality of the radio and the vehicle.

Mr HARDGRAVE—If it is a Toyota, it is bad quality normally. Ford is very good.

CHAIR—We are desperately running out of time and I want to give everyone a go.

Mr St CLAIR—You were talking about the mining camps with 100 people and the rest of it. Do you have a system of UHF that operates through the regional country areas? Does everyone have a UHF radio? What do you use?

Mr BROOKS—We use UHF, but very short range, for two-way between vehicles and between base stations. When I say ‘short range’, I mean mostly a few kilometres. St Barbara, of course, have a magnificent aerial and you can go 60 or 70 kilometres. But 60 or 70 kilometres in that country is not very far.

Mr O'DWYER—Just on that point of UHF or VHF, most of the mining companies are on VHF and, because it is licensed radio, they each have different channels. So they are not compatible. Most of them do not use UHF unless it is in a social capacity.

Mr St CLAIR—What are the transporters, the livestock carriers, using?

Mr O'DWYER—UHF.

CHAIR—Anyone who has not spoken yet can have about three minutes each.

Mr BRINE—I work on ABC Radio with Paul Thompson, the manager here. With regard to commonality of interest, we have just heard about 98 setting up their AM station in Morawa, including all those shires. The ABC has a transmitter here in Geraldton. We have one in Dalwallinu and one in Northam, all coming off the same signal. Because of the cost of what used to be Telecom lines, which are no longer used, and everything being done on satellite, Kalbarri, which an hour and a half to the north of here, has an ABC signal generated from Karratha. Carnarvon has the ABC signal generated from Karratha. So the common interest in this area is that Carnarvon and Kalbarri all use services from Geraldton. The communities are linked through family ties and interest. In Meekatharra the services comes out Geraldton. The Mid West Development Commission wants more commonality. If the ABC signal for Carnarvon, Kalbarri and Meekatharra could be generated from Geraldton, so there was not that huge land divide where very few people live north of the Murchison out through the Pilbara ranges up to Karratha and there is a real human divide and a dividing of interests, then the ABC could better reflect and connect itself with its region. That would be great. We just get to Meekatharra: in town, they get the Karratha signal; out of town, the farmers listen to 531 out of Dalwallinu because they can get it in their car, but they cannot get the FM signal, which is an ABC licence in Meekatharra.

CHAIR—I think we have got that message about regionality. We will certainly raise the Kalbarri thing, both from an ABC and a commercial viewpoint. Before I go to you, Mrs Foulkes-Taylor, we will hear from the gentleman from Gascoyne, because your family has had one go and some people have not had any.

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—We are different people.

CHAIR—I am sorry, but some people have driven 500 and 600 kilometres.

Mr BARRETT—I am from the Gascoyne Development Commission in Carnarvon, about 400 kilometres north of here.

CHAIR—What is your view on that last comment?

Mr BARRETT—I am sorry, I was looking at my questions.

CHAIR—The point made was that there is a commonality between Geraldton and Carnarvon, taking in places like Kalbarri and Meekatharra. Do you agree that there is a regional commonality? What is the regional interest? Where is the commonality of interest? Is the wider community of interest with Geraldton or with Karratha?

Mr BARRETT—I do not know; I cannot answer that. I am quite new to these issues and so I have with me Mr Priestley to cover the technicalities and histories involved. I would like to emphasise that the issues presented in Mr Priestley's submission and from the floor today are extremely relevant for the regional centres.

CHAIR—We do not need a policy speech. All your submissions are important to us. We want to know what you and your Gascoyne people have to say to us as a committee.

Mr BARRETT—There are two points by way of information. One station that seems to be overlooked today is 88FM, the tourist information radio. It was instrumental in the recovery of Exmouth in Cyclone Vance.

CHAIR—What is wrong with it?

Mr BARRETT—I am saying it is a good thing, it is a contingency for emergency management. The SES took it over after Exmouth was destroyed and they plan to roll it out across the north-west. It is a contingency that I would like you to consider. Another point by way of information is the proposal for the square kilometre array telescope. This is a multi-billion dollar project being coordinated internationally. The maintenance spin-off from that is going to generate millions of dollars of contracts per year for regional WA. Part of the assessment involves monitoring background radio interference. The Gascoyne and mid-west regions are being seriously considered for this site. As I said, it is going up against the world. Can you please consider that when you are making your decisions?

CHAIR—Is that in your submission?

Mr BARRETT—I was not here when the submissions were made. There is no submission from Gascoyne Development Commission.

CHAIR—We will accept a supplementary submission from you, if you get it in quickly.

Mr BARRETT—Okay. I have a question in relation to the terms of reference. I have been living up there two years and I have seen two audits on what communications infrastructure we have and what we need. Can the committee give us an indication of what the commitment is to take this beyond a report into action and in what time frame?

CHAIR—No, we cannot give you that. Our job is to write this report, table it in the parliament, debate it and then get the minister's response. We cannot tell you what that is going to be. If there was a change of government at the end of the year and if the minister has not reported on it, we cannot tell you what the new minister would say either.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The key thing is that it is a public document. It is there for everybody to see and a point that people can refer to.

CHAIR—It is a very powerful document and it will have an influence on both sides of politics. Now we will hear from Mrs Foulkes-Taylor.

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—Thank you, Mr Chair; we are married to each other and we actually sleep in the same bed, which a lot of people do not do these days. I am Jano Foulkes-Taylor and he is Michael Foulkes-Taylor. We both represent different organisations on the communications advisory committee and we also travel to different places sometimes.

I just wanted to emphasise the strategic value, and I think there was a little bit too much emphasise earlier on on the fact that there is the sort of bleeding hearts idea and a few pastoralists and so on. It is very important strategically, and I am thinking of things like foot and mouth, invasions, wartime, flood, fire—you name it. I cannot emphasise enough the fact that we must have a reliable communication as well as a good feeling communication.

The ABC does a very good job strategically—I do not care whether it is crackly, or whatever, but it has got to be 24 hours, and that is the point I think we should get through more importantly than anything. I wanted to bring up a couple of things that have not been said before. In respect of the car radio, a lot of cars nowadays have this seek and find. We seek, we never find—that is the problem. Therefore, a lot of people do not get the reception that they may have got if they were patient enough to flick those dials and not fall off the road and hit a kangaroo. So that is a huge problem.

We have had several times, 225 kilometres from here, criminal escapees. This is pretty suburban and that sort of strategy is a huge problem in our area. We do not have enough policing. Therefore, having good communications, a reliable broadcast, is good. A hundred kilometres north of us, as soon as the sun comes up, there is a lousy reception and you do not get it on the radio. One thing that has not been mentioned is that the youth are dropping out. They are not listening to the radio because they cannot hear it and so they play things and I think they are getting dumber and that does not help.

We did do a huge map in 1986 of the transmission of Dalwallinu. It was very interesting. I was part of the group that was part of that. We were experimenting everywhere. The lines were not as circles as on the map. The lines differentiated extremely. So we do not really know the actual transmission value of—

CHAIR—Where do you actually live?

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—If you drew a line from here to Meekatharra, we live half way.

CHAIR—And what would you think of the idea of an AM commercial transmitter at Meekatharra?

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—About eight years ago, I wrote to Plutonic mines, halfway between Mount Newman and Meekatharra. I had a big yarn to the bloke who was there. He had enough power; he had everything that was going to be good. But we could not get to first base. The ABA gave us a hard time. The NTA gave us a hard time and then the ABC said they did not have enough money. There was a mining company prepared to give us a 20-year life and all the power we needed because they said that, if 24-hour power was an issue, that would solve the problem. It would have to be a biggie, but do not forget it does not have to go so far east. It has to come in that circle west of that area; that is the important part.

Just quickly, with regard to the car radios that I have mentioned, I have a little summary here. Firstly, we need the reception; secondly, we need a reception for 24 hours; and, thirdly, we do require news and information and relevant events—it just keeps us up to date; we have to know what is going on.

CHAIR—What is your view on Geraldton, Carnarvon including Kalbarri and Meekatharra, and so on? Do you think that is the wider community of interest?

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—If I am going to be quite frank and blunt about things, I reckon that listening to the women's netball from Geraldton and Dalwallinu gives me the whoops—I am sorry. And it goes on—

CHAIR—But that does not answer my question.

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—No. Your question is: is there a reciprocal arrangement that can be made from here up towards Carnarvon? That is a great idea.

CHAIR—Well, we have heard complaints since we got here about the fact that you are not happy with the Karratha service.

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—Yes. I like the Karratha service actually. It just does not go far enough. I have driven from Meekatharra right up through the Auski, the Hamersley Ranges near Mount Newman, by myself, with a decent car radio, and I noted, specifically for this sort of reason, when the radios came on, when they came off, and the situation is lousy. Karratha, Port Hedland are okay. I did not mind what was coming—I get phone calls from Karratha quite often to discuss issues and I reckon they are okay. But we do not get Karratha, we get Geraldton.

CHAIR—One of our terms of reference is the consolidation of localism. Some of your colleagues have put the case to us today that localism would be enhanced by having some commonality between Carnarvon and Geraldton, including places like Kalbarri and Meekatharra. What I want to know is: do you support that view, and will that enhance localism here?

Mrs FOULKES-TAYLOR—I think it would help, absolutely. It is a good idea. The last thing I wanted to say—and I will not go on any more because other people want to speak—is that the travelling public have to be taken into consideration. It was never done and it never is. The bureaucracies can sit down and write these figures, but 6,000 or 7,000 bleeding-heart pastoralists are not going to shift anybody. We should start talking about the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of travelling public. They are very important people—visitors, tourists, people who are bringing in money, people who are doing investigatory work and public servants. We have to look after them, and they are not getting a service. I think they should be taken into the numbers and that we should do them again. Thank you very much for your time, Mr Chairman.

Dr ASMUSSEN—I will be very short. As we all know, 60 per cent of the population in WA is foreign born, and SBS is not present here. Why?

Mr SHARP—It will be on the 16th—

Dr ASMUSSEN—It is not present here.

CHAIR—When you say that SBS is coming here, are you talking about television or radio?

Dr ASMUSSEN—Both, but we are talking about radio today.

CHAIR—We asked that question in Darwin, and we have not got an answer. We will have to contact SBS and find out what their plans are. Were you talking about SBS putting a station here or about a retransmission facility?

Dr ASMUSSEN—We are talking retransmission.

CHAIR—For the town of Geraldton?

Dr ASMUSSEN—Yes.

Mr SMITH—I will tell you what I know, and it is that SBS are committed. We have been negotiating with them to put their transmitter on our mast that we built at Moresby. The transmitters are actually here, and the equipment is here.

CHAIR—You are talking radio here, aren't you?

Mr SMITH—No, I am talking television. I have no idea about radio, I am sorry.

CHAIR—It occurred to us both in the Northern Territory and from what we have picked up here that the ethnic radio division of SBS does the capital cities very well but that there are pockets in the country with high concentrations of people of overseas birth. I do not think there are many SBS stations in the country that are catering to them. I thought that was the context of your question. It is, is it?

Dr ASMUSSEN—Yes.

Mrs FORSYTH—I am a committee member of the Mid West Development Commission's communications committee. I was a pastoralist at one time and a next-door neighbour to the pastoralists from Meekatharra. When I lived on the station, which I do not at the moment, I was 2½ hours north of Meekatharra and, contrary to other people, I actually did get radio all the way to Meekatharra on a very ordinary radio with a very small aerial. I bought a new aerial because I was assured I would get radio all the way home, and it made no difference whatsoever. Twenty kilometres north of Meekatharra, the radio simply cuts out.

I was going to say quite a lot of what Mrs Foulkes-Taylor has said, but she said it more eloquently than I would have anyway. When I lived in the bush, up to 1994, I received radio 24 hours a day without the benefit of having to have my generator running. When you consider installing something at Meekatharra, at Newman or anywhere else to service the outlying centres, often where only one, two, three or four people live in a residence, you must also consider that these people may not have 240 power 24 hours a day but that they need to have radio reception 24 hours a day nonetheless.

I will just very briefly tell you that in January my son was home alone—the next people were 50 kilometres away—and we had a tornado go through our place which completely flattened the engine room, amongst other things. He could not touch anything in there for fear of being

electrocuted. We had 20 millimetres of rain on top of that, and there was not another person within 50 kilometres. Our next-door neighbours are 100 kilometres away, and the mining company was 50 kilometres away. Also, his telephone went out. He had no idea what was going on. He had no contact with the outside world, and he did not even have the benefit of a radio for comfort or to know whether this was a general rain, whether to expect more to come or what might have come afterwards. It is very important that young people, older people, tourists or whoever who are out in the bush on their own do not have to have a generator to receive radio—radio that was taken for granted in the outlying areas until 1994, when it was just cut off.

CHAIR—Would you like to give us a short submission on that? It is a very important point that you make. It is not just the satellite coming down; it is the retransmission that is the problem. We would be interested in that, and the same goes for this gentleman from Gascoyne. I am sorry if I cut you short, but I wanted to hear what you had to say, not what is supporting someone else. If you want to get a submission in with those two points you made, we would accept that. But get it in quickly, will you?

I would like to thank Geraldton Council for their hospitality, and I would like to thank all of you who have come here today. You have played a very important part in filling a big gap in our hearing knowledge, especially of the Northern Territory and Western Australian circumstances. Similarities are there. We understand that there is a different dynamic, and we will take that on board. We appreciate your frank contribution today. We are sorry we have to rush you, but that is the nature of these inquiries. We can assure you that the evidence you have given by way of a public forum today will play an important part in our committee's report. Thank you very much.

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

That submission 274 from the Shire of Mount Magnet, together with any attachments that have not otherwise been received as exhibits, be received as evidence to the inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia and authorised for publication.

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

That the document about VLW, a petition which we received today and a brochure presented by Malcom Smith be received as evidence to the inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia and incorporated into the committee's records as exhibits Nos 16, 17 and 18 respectively.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 6.09 p.m.