



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## Official Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT  
AND THE ARTS

**Reference: Adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia**

WEDNESDAY, 28 MARCH 2001

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS**  
**Wednesday, 28 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 Lindsay, Ms Livermore, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Neville and Mr St Clair

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

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

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

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**Committee met at 9.24 a.m.****KIRTON, Mr Al, Company Director and General Manager, Coastal Broadcasters Pty Ltd - Radio 4KZ**

**CHAIR**—I declare this public meeting open. We welcome you by teleconference to this inquiry. We will not be able to administer an oath to you because you are not present, but I would like to caution you that these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of any false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be considered a contempt of the parliament. What area does Coastal Broadcasters cover?

**Mr Kirton**—It is a defined service area from Deeral, an area south of Cairns, through to the Cardwell Ranges, a line that goes about 40 kilometres south of the township of Cardwell in Far North Queensland.

**CHAIR**—And what sort of licence do you have?

**Mr Kirton**—We have a commercial broadcasting licence with a section 39, and we also have one high power open narrowcasting service.

**CHAIR**—What format is 4KZ? Is that a general theatre for music format and local information. You have a section 39 as well; is that the idea?

**Mr Kirton**—That is correct.

**CHAIR**—And what is that known as?

**Mr Kirton**—It is known as KOOL-FM.

**CHAIR**—What is your narrowcast licence known as?

**Mr Kirton**—It is known as Radio 4AY.

**CHAIR**—And it is in the same area?

**Mr Kirton**—It is, but it does not cover the entire area as the other services do.

**CHAIR**—How did you get three licences in the one area?

**Mr Kirton**—One is a high power open narrowcasting licence that only presents programming of limited appeal to a niche audience.

**CHAIR**—What is your format on that one?

**Mr Kirton**—That has Christian programming from 10 at night until about six in the morning and then presents a country music format for the rest of the day.

**CHAIR**—And does it do news and interviews as well?

**Mr Kirton**—No, it does not have any of those.

**CHAIR**—So it is purely Christian and country and western?

**Mr Kirton**—At this stage, yes.

**CHAIR**—We now have a bit of context of where you are coming from. Would you like to give us an overview of your submission and any salient points that you would like to raise?

**Mr Kirton**—I have been in the commercial radio industry for over 30 years, the past 25 of them have been in management of some regional stations in Roma, Charleville and Innisfail. I honestly from the heart believe that the industry in Australia has gone from gross over-regulation to what I would say is reckless under-regulation in a couple of years. I honestly believe that networking is strangling the industry. It has caused a huge loss of jobs and a deterioration in the standard of service to the local community. I am sure the committee has had this brought to its attention on many occasions with regard to emergency services for fires, cyclones, floods, et cetera.

I honestly believe that the criteria for obtaining a broadcasting licence should be that the respective applicants present a well-balanced program format that is in the community's interest. Also, there should be sound financial proposals which, by their nature, would enhance better programming. I also believe in majority Australian shareholding. I believe the auction system only allows the big boys to participate in commercial broadcasting and as such I do not think it is in the best interests of the community at large.

**CHAIR**—Is that your statement?

**Mr Kirton**—If I may continue, Mr Chairman.

**CHAIR**—Yes, sure.

**Mr Kirton**—The ABA, I believe, urgently needs a huge shake-up. With respect, I believe we perhaps should have fewer professors and some more broadcasting people in the ABA. I have many instances where the ACA, the Australian Communications Authority, has commented about the ineptitude in the ABA, and I would be most happy to provide these details in camera and under privilege. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Kirton. What is your ownership structure?

**Mr Kirton**—Our ownership structure is 100 per cent Australian.

**CHAIR**—Is that a local company?

**Mr Kirton**—It is a local company; 51 per cent of our shareholders are in the listening area of the radio station.

**CHAIR**—You do not have any other stations besides these three?

**Mr Kirton**—No, we do not, but they are the 49 per cent interest in our station, from Alice Springs commercial broadcasters who have had an interest in us since 1987.

**CHAIR**—Your mainstream station is an AM station, isn't it?

**Mr Kirton**—It is mainly an AM station, but because of the terrain in Far North Queensland we require a number of translators, and one of those is AM and three or four of those are FM.

**CHAIR**—Yes, but the core station itself is AM?

**Mr Kirton**—That is correct.

**CHAIR**—Could you give us a bit of an idea of your format? Do you employ a journalist? How much of the day do you go live? How much do you record? Do you take any programs online?

**Mr Kirton**—The answer to your question is we present a live breakfast program from six in the morning till nine in the morning. That is a full service program with local news, national news, competitions, market reports, music, et cetera. Between 9 a.m. and midday we relay the John Laws program, which is rather popular; many stations around Australia do that. At midday we then present a live luncheon program through till approximately 3 p.m. We have a combination of live and automated programs between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.

**CHAIR**—Are they your own programs or do you buy them online?

**Mr Kirton**—No, they are all generated locally.

**CHAIR**—What do you do overnight?

**Mr Kirton**—Between 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. daylight saving time, we have an automated format with live news, community service, music, et cetera. Then at 11 p.m. during daylight saving time and from midnight outside of daylight saving time, we relay the 2UE overnight program, which is basically an open line program.

**CHAIR**—Okay, we have got a bit of a picture now of your station. I am now going to swing to my colleagues.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Mr Kirton, it is good to talk to you. Is the viability certainly there as far as you can see it for local radio if you stay local and produce local programming?

**Mr Kirton**—Absolutely. All stations have to look at economies of scale and the use of modern technology to reduce operational overhead. In many instances 40 per cent of overheads are wages, but I even see much smaller markets than ours that are totally viable, such as 4LG Longreach and 4VL Charleville.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—I read in your submission that some major market stations are running on satellite during the day just to save a lousy \$15 an hour in wages. Do you make that observation about those who are in markets not too far to the north or too far to the south of yours?

**Mr Kirton**—And others.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—So that is your general understanding of the economics of what they are saving as a result of going on to a networking kind of approach?

**Mr Kirton**—For example, our defined service area is some 30,000 people. I see other markets in New South Wales and elsewhere of 50,000, 60,000, 100,000 people with networked and automated programs right in the middle of the day.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Given that you have been in the industry for 30 years—and I think you worked with half of my schoolmates when they worked with you at 4ZR or 4KZ in years past, so I know you have been around the radio industry a long time—do you think their best avenue to save money is on the number of personnel they have got on stream?

**Mr Kirton**—No. There are obviously other economies of scale—for instance, if you have 30 radio stations and you want to buy stationery or you want to buy toilet rolls. You can obviously achieve very big savings by buying programs or products in bulk.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—I also note in your submission that you believe that the ABA is totally out of touch with real people working in real radio stations, that Professor Flint should go, and that there should definitely be an inquiry into the ABA. Are the ABA not just simply regulating government rules and really is it not the fault of the legislation, or are the ABA themselves part of the problem, and, if so, in what way?

**Mr Kirton**—Obviously the ABA regulate under the direction of parliament. Even when one makes a phone call about a simple issue to the ABA—and I never want to be taken as a racist—one often has difficulty communicating in the English language with some of the people at the ABA.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Are you saying that the ABA and their internal processes are contributing to some of the very real problems that currently occur in the commercial radio sector?

**Mr Kirton**—Yes. We have one instance of a translator of ours where the ABA and the ACA cannot agree on whether the licence should be issued. The station, with the full knowledge of the ABA and the ACA, is transmitting, but no formal and final licence has been issued. That is just typical of some of the things I am talking about. I would be very happy to document them on my return to Innisfail.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—I think the committee would be very pleased to receive any additional submission from you concerning difficulties you have had with the ABA, maybe even those that have not been resolved to date, including time lines involved and how long from the point of recognising a problem to actually having it resolved. Thank you very much.



**Mr JULL**—Could we get your definition of localism, and could you tell us at what point you believe that networking starts to destroy localism?

**Mr Kirton**—I suppose we could look at just ordinary periods of time and times where there are weather emergencies, et cetera. In times of emergency there have been instances around the industry where local fire authorities, et cetera—and I am sure your committee has heard numerous instances of this—have been unable to get information to air in a timely manner. With regard to times outside emergencies, there are things such as mispronunciation of local area names or non-coverage of major local events. I feel that certainly some degree of networking is acceptable, but especially during prime times and networking across areas with a community of interest. It is all very well to network between Sydney and Brisbane or whatever or if it is a generic type program such as the *John Laws Morning Show*, but networking in my opinion is acceptable in adjoining markets, for example.

**Mr JULL**—If there was an emergency—say, a cyclone in Innisfail—have you got the capacity to get to air on all three programs?

**Mr Kirton**—Absolutely.

**Mr JULL**—Even the narrowcast?

**Mr Kirton**—Absolutely. Last year, for example, we had two floods and one cyclone. Our station naturally is totally live and local 24 hours a day under those circumstances. We all have pagers and mobile phones. Even at times when we are automated we are able to have somebody at that station within 10 minutes.

**Mr MOSSFIELD**—Thank you, Mr Kirton. I have a couple of questions, one of which would certainly relate to digital radio and new technology. What difficulties do you have as an independent operator in adjusting to new technology?

**Mr Kirton**—None. In fact we lead many of the larger stations. For many years, we have been Internet service providers and we have two full-time IT personnel on staff.

**Mr MOSSFIELD**—Good. Some other independent people have indicated concerns there. You did indicate some concern about regulations. I think you indicated that the act has moved from over-regulation to a situation where now you are grossly under-regulated. Could you expand on that and give us any suggestions as to what recommendations we should make in that area?

**Mr Kirton**—I will give you an example. Previously, one applied for their licence I think, in most cases, for a three-year term—and I think that may have been increased to five years. The application used to run into probably, even for a small station such as ours, 100 or 200 pages of which 14 copies had to be provided to the ABA. Now it is a simple two or three page document that takes about five minutes to complete. I do not advocate either as being good. I do believe some form of justification for holding the precious trust of a broadcasting licence should be in place.

**Mr MOSSFIELD**—Finally, we have heard a lot lately about the deterioration of services in the country—banks closing, government services disappearing and loss of employment opportunities. What part would radio play in revitalising country regions in your view?

**Mr Kirton**—Radio plays a huge role. Looking at the whole reason for the inquiry, I believe the government may not have been fully aware of the enormous social benefits and the influence of commercial radio in Australia otherwise they probably would not have allowed as much overseas participation and networking in the first place.

**Mr MOSSFIELD**—Thank you.

**Mr MURPHY**—Good morning, Mr Kirton. I would just like to hear your response to the recent announcement by Southern Cross and the potential impact that that might have on you.

**Mr Kirton**—Being on vacation at the moment, I must confess that I am not up to day-to-day news as much as I would be back in Innisfail. It would not have much of an impact on us. The 2UE organisation does provide us with programming in the form of Queensland news up until 10 p.m. and then a generic Australia-wide news service between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. We also, as I stated previously, take the John Laws program from there. Should the status quo remain, I cannot see any impact.

**Mr MURPHY**—Okay. That is really all I wanted to ask you.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Mr Kirton, just one quick question: how many people do you employ across the three stations in total?

**Mr Kirton**—Just off the top of my head, I would say in the vicinity of 14 full-time people and probably three or four part-time people.

**Mr GIBBONS**—How many of those are actually qualified journalists?

**Mr Kirton**—One is a fully qualified journalist.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Does that particular person prepare a local news bulletin?

**Mr Kirton**—I must confess that the person who is the qualified journalist is not working in the news area at the moment. She is conducting the breakfast program on KOOL-FM, but we do have a part-time person who is not a qualified journalist, but he has had more experience in radio than I have and he compiles fresh bulletins in the mornings.

**CHAIR**—Do you put that together yourself? Do you take it from the local paper or do you pick it up from the local TV station? How do you compile your news bulletin? The local news that is, not the state news or the national news, but the local bulletin.

**Mr Kirton**—From numerous sources obviously. A lead may come from television or from a newspaper, but then it is the responsibility of the journalist to look at the two sides of that story and actually contact the people concerned to get a fresh and independent perspective on the story.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—As far as the compilation of your news service is concerned, whether or not the person has a journalism degree is not as important as whether or not you are actually providing some input from the local area. I am sure that the biggest newspaper owner in Queensland, Mr Dixon from the *Tully Times*, would be on the phone to you if you were not getting the local patch right.

**Mr Kirton**—Yes, like anybody, we are only human, but we do pride ourselves on endeavouring to be factual and fair.

**CHAIR**—Are there any other points you wanted to raise, Mr Kirton?

**Mr Kirton**—I would like it included in the transcript that throughout this discussion this morning I have had great difficulty in hearing all of the speakers. Had I been there in person, I may well have wanted to say quite a bit more.

**CHAIR**—Your evidence has come through to us very clearly, and you are most articulate, so please do not think that the quality of your evidence has suffered in any way.

**Mr Kirton**—Thank you for that.

**CHAIR**—We would like you to come back to us on those two issues that Mr Hardgrave spoke about—that is, the ABA and the emergency services.

**Mr Kirton**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Also, if you want to expand on how you would see stations being re-regulated without returning to the pre-1992 situation, but not to the extent of the laissez-faire attitude that is going on at present, you could get back to us on that.

**Mr JULL**—There is just one other thing. If localism became a requirement of these regional radio licences, what effect would it have on the industry as it is presently structured? In other words, could they in fact adapt?

**Mr Kirton**—That is a very hard question. I think that would be dependent on how far backwards their localism had gone. Obviously, in this industry we refer to two major players in the commercial broadcasting industry in Australia, but really there is a third. Need I say any more?

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for your evidence. We look forward to your supplementary submission. We will be forwarding you a *Hansard* draft of your evidence this morning.

**Mr Kirton**—I would like to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to speak this morning. I look forward to reading the transcripts of many other hearings.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much.

[9.39 a.m.]

**DUNSTONE, Mr Arthur James (Private capacity)**

**CHAIR**—Can you hear us, Mr Dunstone? Are you on the line?

**Mr Dunstone**—I can only just hear you.

**CHAIR**—Is that better?

**Mr Dunstone**—Very little.

**CHAIR**—I am sorry; I think we are going to have to sail with this. We can hear you quite clearly, and we want to hear from you rather than you hear from us. All we need to do is fire some questions at you. Be assured that we are hearing you loud and clear at this end.

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes. I can hear you. You are very faint but I can hear you.

**CHAIR**—All right. We are not going to ask you to take an oath, Mr Dunstone, but I have to caution you that these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of any false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I would also ask you to stay on the line at the end of our interview to make sure, if there are any proper names or spellings of things, that we can refer those to the *Hansard* people.

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—To commence the evidence, would you give us your full name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

**Mr Dunstone**—My full name is Arthur James Dunstone, and my capacity or my interest in appearing before this inquiry is simply that I am a born again Christian, one of the many thousands who have listened to Central Victorian Gospel Radio, who is very concerned about the spiritual declension in our land and in our area. We feel a very great need for there to be clear-cut Christian teaching freely available to our people, and Central Victorian Gospel Radio was a very excellent source of that teaching. That is the only capacity I am appearing in.

**CHAIR**—I appreciate your angle, but bear in mind we have four terms of reference. I would like you to relate what you have to say to one of those four terms. The first one is the part that radio plays in the fabric of community life; secondly, the extent to which radio affects employment, presumably both inside and outside the industry; thirdly, the degree of localism, and this is the thing the committee has been concentrating on—local news, local sport, local talk-back, weather, community announcements and the like—and the extent to which networking has affected that and perhaps deprived stations of any localism or reduced it severely; and the fourth term of reference is the part that digital radio might play in any future

realignment of regional radio. For example, with your Christian radio broadcasts, are they all locally sourced or are they taken online from some network organisation?

**Mr Dunstone**—I have not been involved except in a very minor way with Central Victorian Gospel Radio but—

**CHAIR**—Have you appeared on any of their programs?

**Mr Dunstone**—I have done, yes.

**CHAIR**—So that would have come out of a local studio in what town?

**Mr Dunstone**—That is right. I appeared live there and I have recorded programs for them.

**CHAIR**—And do they take a lot of other programs online?

**Mr Dunstone**—As far as I know they take none online.

**CHAIR**—Do they take any of the American gospel people or anyone like that?

**Mr Dunstone**—They have some recorded programs from those people.

**CHAIR**—But they do not take them online?

**Mr Dunstone**—Not online—nothing online as far as I know.

**CHAIR**—Do they have a local news program—local state and national news?

**Mr Dunstone**—Not a news program or newscast as such, but they broadcast anything of vital interest, such as fire warnings, flood warnings, storm warnings and things like that.

**CHAIR**—Where are you based, Mr Dunstone?

**Mr Dunstone**—I am in Echuca. Echuca would be about 120 to 130 kilometres away from the Central Victorian Gospel Radio studio.

**CHAIR**—And you pick it up quite clearly?

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes. We go to a lot of trouble I might say to get it, but we get it quite clearly.

**CHAIR**—So it has a fairly big coverage area?

**Mr Dunstone**—It does, yes.

**CHAIR**—What other dimensions do you think, given those terms of reference—

**Mr Dunstone**—I have got the terms of reference here in front of me, and No. 3 is the effect on individuals, families and small business. I do not know about small business, but I feel that radio—well, all forms of media as far as that is concerned—has a tremendous effect on individuals and families, and unfortunately most of it is detrimental as far as I can see.

**CHAIR**—Do you note a deterioration in your other stations? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr Dunstone**—That is right, yes.

**CHAIR**—Give us some examples, Mr Dunstone.

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes, I have got something listed here. Our listening is mainly to the ABC, and then we mainly only listen for news. In the last few weeks I have listed a few—they are certainly not all there—of instances of obscene language on the ABC.

**CHAIR**—Which channel of the ABC?

**Mr Dunstone**—Goldfields FM. It is the Bendigo station on 91.1, I think, on the FM band.

**CHAIR**—No, that is not an ABC station; that is a commercial station.

**Mr Dunstone**—No, it is the ABC.

**CHAIR**—Oh, that is their regional—

**Mr Dunstone**—Their regional station and they take relays from Melbourne and all round.

**CHAIR**—I have never heard any obscenity on ABC regional radio. We have had complaints about Triple J.

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes. In fact, I have mentioned to the ABA that in my opinion if that was closed down there would be joy among the angels in heaven. It is woeful, it is shocking.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Mr Dunstone, there would probably be a bit of joy amongst all the members of parliament in Canberra as well too. Did you realise that the ABC was not subjected to the same kinds of rules and regulations governing content standards as the commercial free-to-air operators?

**Mr Dunstone**—I did not know that, but I would not be surprised.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—So they are able to broadcast profanities without any restriction on that, other than perhaps the taste or otherwise of the presenter or station management.

**Mr Dunstone**—I see. That might account for some of the foul language that we hear there from time to time, because I have written to our local ABC management on two occasions in the past complaining about obscene language.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—What was the reply that you received?

**Mr Dunstone**—The reply was along the lines, ‘You’re the only one who complained, so what are you grizzling about? You must be the one out of kilter.’

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—You may, of course, be the only one listening to the broadcast—that might be the other problem—but I agree. Mr Dunstone, do you think then the ABC might be very well served by having regular community reference meetings to find out what people expect of them?

**Mr Dunstone**—That may help. I feel that they do need to clean their programs up considerably.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—With regard to regional areas and the fact that the ABC are such a vital link, are you concerned therefore that their programming is catering for a lower end of the common denominator rather than the higher end?

**Mr Dunstone**—I think it could be. To a large extent they are probably trying to steer a middle course. I feel that their content needs to be cleaned up considerably. They often have obscene language and that can only have a detrimental effect on individuals and families. While we cannot hang it all on the ABC, we are seeing a large amount of this worked out in the huge problems that we have on the drug scene, with alcoholism, broken families and all this kind of thing. We cannot hang it all on the ABC, that is for sure, but I feel that the ABC should be setting a much higher standard.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Mr Dunstone, how vital is the Central Victorian Gospel Radio organisation to maintaining some sort of balance across the range of services in your community?

**Mr Dunstone**—I feel they are absolutely vital. I do not know of any other media outlet that was presenting the gospel in such a clear manner as they were. A tremendous number of people were helped by their programs and by their contact with the personnel, because they used to ring the station and ask for help and explain how appreciative they were of their programs. They had a very beneficial effect on our area.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Have you communicated all of this to the Australian Broadcasting Authority?

**Mr Dunstone**—I have done that but they do not want to hear about it—at least that is the impression I am getting.

**Mr JULL**—Was the gospel radio organisation a subscription station?

**Mr Dunstone**—No.

**Mr JULL**—It was provided free of charge?



**Mr Dunstone**—Absolutely free. It is run totally by volunteers. If people would like to make a donation, the station is very appreciative of the Lord's provision through the listeners. But they do not solicit donations; they do not solicit funds in any way at all.

**Mr JULL**—In Echuca, with the exception of this particular station and regional ABC, what other stations have you got the capacity to be able to listen to?

**Mr Dunstone**—We could probably listen to lots of them, but because of the content we do not. There is no Christian content, so we do not listen to them. We have a local FM station that started here a while ago, but it does not appeal to us because of its content. We can get 3BO Bendigo and I think there is Star FM from Bendigo. We can get the Shepparton stations and we can get Deniliquin. I could not even begin to guess how many we would have access to if we wanted them, but the programs just do not appeal to us.

**CHAIR**—Mr Dunstone, were there any other matters that you would like to raise briefly before we finish asking questions?

**Mr Dunstone**—I had a list here. You asked if I could give instances of obscene language but I do not know whether you want to hear what I have got here.

**CHAIR**—Could you let us have that in writing, and also which channel of the ABC you were listening to at the time.

**Mr Dunstone**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—We will take that in as a supplementary submission.

**Mr Dunstone**—I can do that. There is one thing that I would like to mention. About 12 months ago I picked up a pamphlet from our local shire office headed, 'If you could save one Australian life, would you?' It then went on to say, 'Attend a new suicide prevention strategy workshop in your community.' Our country has a tremendous suicide problem. This pamphlet went on to say:

Australia has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Every day we have an average of seven completed suicides and 210 attempted suicides. This tragedy has a profound personal effect on all associated with these people—family, friends and society as a whole.

I would have no means of knowing whether those statistics are correct or not, but we do know that there is a tremendous suicide problem in our country. Jesus Christ is the answer to that problem. Our governments and people in authority are trying to do something about it—and praise the Lord for that—

**CHAIR**—How does that relate to your radio station? Can you make the link there for me.

**Mr Dunstone**—Certainly. One fellow in Townsville rang me, last July I think it was, saying he had listened to Central Victorian Gospel Radio. He was running away from the Lord and the Lord caught up with him in Townsville. He rang me. He committed his life to Christ and he was saved for time and for eternity. He had suicidal tendencies. He is one fellow that I know of who

has been tremendously helped by Central Victorian Gospel Radio. I would be quick to admit that not everybody is going to listen to that program, but then not everybody is going to take notice of these other avenues of help that are being given either.

**CHAIR**—Yes. You are providing people with options, aren't you?

**Mr Dunstone**—That is right, yes.

**CHAIR**—Mr Dunstone, thank you very much for your evidence and for joining us this morning.. We appreciate it very much. We will sending you a copy of the *Hansard* draft of today's proceedings.

**Mr Dunstone**—Thank you.

[10.11 a.m.]

**COLLIER, Mrs Shirley Alice, Presenter and Secretary, Central Victorian Gospel Radio Inc.**

**McDONALD, Mr Robert Rupert, Engineer and Treasurer, Central Victorian Gospel Radio Inc.**

**WILLMER, Mr Robert Frederick, President, Central Victorian Gospel Radio Inc.**

**CHAIR**—I welcome you all by teleconference. We have a technical problem, but we can hear you quite clearly. I will not ask you to swear an oath—it is not appropriate if you are not present—but I did want to caution you that these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of any false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be considered a contempt of the parliament. To commence your evidence, could you give us a brief description of your radio station, its location and its coverage?

**Mr Willmer**—We are located in a little town called Harcourt, which is just below Bendigo. We had been an aspirant since 1983. Many times we nearly got to the licence stage and then missed out, and then the last time we went for a licence—12 months ago—and we were put out; RPH got the frequency.

**CHAIR**—Are you a narrowcast or a community station?

**Mr Willmer**—We are a community station—that is what we have been trying for.

**CHAIR**—How much of your five-minute sponsorship do you use, or do you use any at all?

**Mr Willmer**—No, we do not use any sponsorship. We rely on people to give to us, and over the 18-odd years we have never lacked funds.

**CHAIR**—You obviously have very strong Christian talk shows and so on, but what is your music format?

**Mr Willmer**—Each presenter is able to present what music they prefer or what requests come in.

**CHAIR**—Do you use a lot of gospel stuff?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes. It is all Christian orientated—I should not say that it is all Christian, because we have some classical music.

**CHAIR**—Do you have any local, state or national news?

**Mr Willmer**—No, we do not run any newscasts. We do try not to duplicate what is on other radios.

**CHAIR**—Okay. Do you take any programs on line? Do you network any programs?

**Mr Willmer**—No, we have not networked any programs at all and we have operated 24 hours a day.

**CHAIR**—Do you buy in any on tape?

**Mr Willmer**—No, we do not buy any, but we have had some CDs and recorded programs sent to us.

**CHAIR**—I would like you to try to craft your evidence along the terms of reference—you have those in front of you, no doubt—for instance, the part radio plays in the fabric of community life; its impact on employment; the degree of localism. I do not suppose there is much point in your commenting on networking if you do not participate in it. Finally, if you could comment on whether you see a future for digital radio. I imagine you would be interested in the first two.

**Mr Willmer**—We have been told by the minister of communication to hold our group together for digital radio, but it is pretty hard to do that when we are not having any test broadcasts.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Mr Willmer, with regard to the amount of time you have actually broadcast since 1983, were you one of the people given a permanent temporary licence about five years ago?

**Mr Willmer**—We were given a permanent temporary licence for two years. We broadcast for two non-stop.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—What was the reaction during your broadcast time? Can you give us some account of the support that you had, the geography as well as perhaps the demography of that support?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, we cover a lot of the rural area around Bendigo up to Echuca, which is the farthest north, just about to Shepparton across to Boort, St Arnaud, Avoca, Daylesford, Woodend and then we get cut off by Mount Macedon down Melbourne way. We have had a great lot of feedback. We averaged about 20,000 calls for the year to the studio for various things, some for requests but others for help.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—With regards to requests or help, or any other form of feedback, what about the demographics of those, the age profiles? Have you also been involving people from various age groups in your broadcasts as announcers?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, we have got some very young people, but we do try to cater from the kinders up. We have got people who do kinder programs of a morning, and we try to cater for

all age groups. We have got some young people, not many. I suppose the older ones are the main ones, but we have got some on the technical side as well as on the broadcasting side.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—I also want to ask about the Australian Broadcasting Authority. There is nothing in your submission, but from comments that I have heard—and not necessarily as evidence formally before the committee—the ABA does not seem to like Christian broadcaster aspirants. I guess by the laughter that you must agree with that comment.

**Mr McDonald**—Yes, it seems that way.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Can you give us any insight into your experience with the ABA on this issue?

**Mr Willmer**—Nothing factual. It is very difficult to say things along those lines, and that is what we laughed about. It does seem that there are two sets of rules for the community broadcast people. We went through a lot of background to change our model rules just for the ABA's benefit.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—When did you do that? Can you maybe give us a bit of a snapshot of the various stages of dealing with this organisation either in its current form or in the ABT form? Has there been a consistent approach to you or has there just been a new set of hurdles invented every few years?

**Mr Willmer**—That would be right; it seems that way sometimes.

**Mr McDonald**—Just after 1986, we changed our rules at the request of the ABA bit by bit until we complied with whatever they wanted.

**Mr GIBBONS**—I am going to ask some question which I already know the answers to, but it is important that we get these things in the *Hansard* record. When did you actually cease your 24-hour transmission? You said about 12 months ago; is that correct?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, March 31.

**Mr GIBBONS**—I understand that the local community radio station in Bendigo had offered you some time to broadcast. Have you been able to take advantage of that?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, we do take CCC from midnight on Sunday night right through to eight o'clock Sunday morning—which we pay for—and we have had 2½ hours on Tuesday night.

**Mr GIBBONS**—So I take it that keeps your people still interested and keeps the actual machinery ticking over pending a result?

**Mr Willmer**—I reckon it gives about a quarter of our people the opportunity.

**Mr GIBBONS**—For what period were you broadcasting for 24 hours a day seven days a week?

**Mr Willmer**—For two years.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Prior to two years, how often were you on the air?

**Mr Willmer**—As often as we were allowed. It started off, I think, with three days on and then weeks off, months off. Then it went to a couple of weeks three times a year, and then it went to a month.

**Mr McDonald**—We made 34 temporary broadcast licence applications over that period of time.

**Mr GIBBONS**—You have been critical of the ABA, as indeed a lot of the people who have appeared before this inquiry have. Do you have all of your documentation in terms of your dealings with the ABA—their responses to your requests?

**Mr Willmer**—We have some of them here with us.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Yes, but you still have all that sort of documentation in your possession?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes. Can I quote an item from their reasons for not giving us the licence?

**Mr GIBBONS**—Yes.

**Mr McDonald**—They said, ‘There was little evidence of a strong need for an exclusively Christian service, other than the 1996 census data which showed that 69.2 per cent of the population nominate themselves as Christians.’ We have refuted this because we have had hundreds of supporting letters. We have had 4,000 signatures—as you will probably remember—on a petition asking for a permanent Christian broadcast station in the area.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Yes, I remember that well. So what would you guesstimate your audience would have been in the last 12 or 18 months when you were transmitting 24 hours? Had you done any surveys to try to work out just how many people were actually listening?

**Mr Willmer**—No. The only thing we can go on is our phone calls that have come in. We were getting quite a few from the prison, but the prison stopped the inmates ringing out. I do not know whether they had a change of policy or something there. We had quite good work with them, but we can only rely on the mail that we got in and what people rang in and said.

**Mr McDonald**—We got 150 letters of support—

**Mr GIBBONS**—I understand Vision Australia were granted the licence on that frequency. Have they been approached or have they offered to share any of the time? Are they actually broadcasting 24 hours a day seven days a week?

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, they are broadcasting 24 hours a day, but I do not think there is anything local that has come from Bendigo yet to my knowledge. It has come from other centres. Of course, at eleven o’clock at night they go to the BBC overnight service until half past six or

seven in the morning or something like that. In the early part of 1999 two of our members and I went down to the Kooyong Road RPH and did a training session with them called 'Turning print into sound', which we thought was quite beneficial. We were then on temporary broadcast. We did offer to make any announcements for the blind people that were in our area on anything that was happening. They never took us up on that. Later I did have a phone call from Stephen Jolley, who was going to meet us and have a cup of coffee and discuss some of the matters, but he went to Bendigo. On the day that was arranged, he just did not front. So we missed out there.

**Mr GIBBONS**—Right. And they have not offered to allocate you any of the time on a fee for service basis at all, to go back onto that frequency even for a couple of hours a day or an evening?

**Mr Willmer**—No, they have not.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—I would like to try to clarify again what the ABA's response to you has been. I would not for a moment be hesitant or feel intimidated by this organisation when you are dealing with us. It is just that I have heard similar concerns expressed by other Christian broadcast aspirants in other parts of Australia that the ABA just do not seem to want Christian broadcasters in stand alone. I cannot pinpoint a person—I am hoping you might be able to—but they believe that, if they give the Christians a frequency, they are going to have to give other religious denominations, faiths or beliefs a frequency as well. Have you heard comments like that?

**Mr Willmer**—Not really; not from them.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Where have you heard them from?

**Mr Willmer**—I do not think we have heard it at all.

**Mr HARDGRAVE**—Fair enough. It must be a view in one part of Australia that does not reach Bendigo.

**CHAIR**—Are you aware of any surveys of listenership taken in your broadcast area? Do you have an AC Nielsen poll or anything like that that might give you an indication of what percentage of listenership you have?

**Mrs Collier**—There is one just out now. AC Nielsen did one in this area last week. Even the likes of Triple C and RPH were not even mentioned on the screening. If you listened to those, you would have had to put their numbers in.

**CHAIR**—On the questionnaire was there anything that said 'other'?

**Mrs Collier**—That was the only thing. There was a little column for 'other'.

**CHAIR**—It is a pity, isn't it? I think some of the ABC services do not get a very high listenership. It would be interesting to compare what yours was with some of those smaller ones.

**Mr Willmer**—Yes, it would.

**CHAIR**—Mr Willmer, Mrs Collier and Mr McDonald, thank you very much for your evidence this morning. We appreciate the trouble you have gone to in putting your submission together and making yourselves available. We will forward you a copy of the *Hansard* draft and will take your views into consideration in our deliberations. On behalf of the committee, I thank all the witnesses who have joined us by teleconference today in this public hearing.

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

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

**Committee adjourned at 10.27 a.m.**