



National Party of Australia

Federal Secretariat

Secretary:.....

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25 OCT 2000

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND
THE ARTS

October 23 2000

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts	
Submission No:	111
Date Received:	25/10/00
Secretary:	Janet Holmes

The Secretary
House Communications Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

*Ref: Inquiry into the Adequacy of Radio Services
in
non-metropolitan Australia*

Dear Sir/Madam

I am pleased to present the attached Submission on behalf of the National Party of Australia for the consideration of the House Communications Committee during its Inquiry into the Adequacy of Radio Services in non-metropolitan Australia.

Yours faithfully

Helen Dickie
Federal President

Submission by the National Party of Australia to the House of Representatives Communications Committee Inquiry into the Adequacy of Radio Services in non-metropolitan Australia

Introduction

The National Party of Australia congratulates the Government on its initiative to establish this inquiry and welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission.

The Party believes such an inquiry is long overdue.

As an organisation made up of people living and working beyond the capital cities, and of Federal and State Parliamentarians representing country and regional electorates, we have been concerned for many years at the erosion of localism across the board of non-metropolitan media activity.

For instance, an internal review of the Party as far back as May 1988 observed: 'There have been dramatic changes to the entire media ownership and structure throughout the country. Virtually all print, radio and television media is now controlled by a mere handful of people. There are very few independently owned media organisations today, even in country areas.' (*The Future – A Report by the Committee of Review into the Future Direction of the National Party of Australia, May 1988*).

The crux of the Party's concern – and it relates to print and electronic media across country and regional Australia – is that the contraction of ownership has increased networking and centralised production with an adverse impact on local content and local jobs.

Historically, most country papers and radio stations were local, family-owned enterprises. In more recent years, they have found it increasingly difficult to maintain competitiveness against a background of rising costs, declining profits and very substantial technological change. They have become prime targets for take over by larger groups and networks.

The most regrettable aspects of this have been job losses in local communities, an erosion of community of interest commitment by the so-called 'local' media and a significant decline in local content, especially in terms of news, community service and emergency announcements.

This impact is particularly noticeable in the radio medium.

Decline of local radio

The wholesale deregulation of non-metropolitan radio was facilitated by the Broadcasting Services Act 1992.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), in a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Broadcasting Services Act in May 1999, observed:

Since 1992, there has been significant rationalisation and restructuring in the radio industry. There has been a significant consolidation of stations and formation of larger networks and an increase in networking, greater use of centralised newsrooms and shared facilities, and an increased use of common financial and management systems. Syndicated news services now account for a majority of news services in regional stations.

Examples of this consolidation and networking can be found in the operations of stations owned by the British Daily Mail Group (DMG) and the Broadcast Operations Group (BOG).

The Party understands DMG currently owns 57 regional radio licences in Australia, predominantly in Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. All of these are serviced by three 'hub' stations – in Albury, NSW, Townsville, Queensland and Bunbury, Western Australia.

The BOG group has 13 regional radio stations in NSW and three in Queensland, all hubbed from Radio 2SM in Sydney.

The extent of networking is heavy and appears to be increasing. For example, in the DMG group, networking has gone from 74 to 136 broadcast hours per week in several cases, or from 74 to 123.5 hours, or 74 to 93.5 hours. In a number of cases – for example 93.9 Star FM in Young and 102.3 Star FM in Port Macquarie - networked air time now accounts for 100% of air time.

Many programmes heard on local radio stations emanate from a centre hundreds of miles away. So-called local news bulletins are prepared by journalists in the main 'hub' newsroom who frequently have no knowledge of the local issues of importance to a particular community for which they are preparing broadcast material.

Moreover, 'distant' broadcasters often do not know the correct pronunciation for local towns, rivers, dams, roads, geographic locations etc. To local people, hearing names of their localities mispronounced on their so-called local radio is insulting.

An important area of concern about widespread radio networking is that it diminishes the ability to broadcast local community and emergency service announcements.

There is less opportunity for local Police, emergency service or bushfire brigade officials to quickly interrupt programmes and advise the community of a particular accident, road closure, power failure, storm, flood or fire. In this context, please note the attached comments from Mr Don Kilgour, MLA, the Member for Shepparton in the Victorian Parliament.

Detailed local weather reports, river heights, market reports, sports results and even funeral announcements are important pieces of information to local communities. They used to broadcast by local radio stations free of charge in the community interest. They are now either non-existent, heavily curtailed, or can only be aired through paid advertising.

While networked radio stations provide timeslots for some local content, such as weekly reports by local mayors or shire presidents and local business advertising, the National Party contends this is nowhere near as substantial as it used to be. In terms of advertising, there is less opportunity for local businesses to advertise their products on local radio.

Against a background of diminishing government and private sector services, of increasing regionalisation of banking, health and other services, of declining job opportunities and population drift to major regional centres or capital cities, country communities now have to pull together perhaps more than at any time in the past.

It is, in every sense, the community spirit of local people that keeps many small towns and villages going. Everything local in these situations is valuable and essential. Locally owned and run newspapers and radio stations were central to such effort. With these declining, there is a further loss of localism.

Examples of how seriously local communities regard the trend in radio programming can be found in the selection of local newspaper articles and advertisements, which are attached for the information of Committee members. Of particular interest is the fact that Sea-FM in Mackay, Queensland, has been advertising in the local *Daily Mercury* newspaper to highlight that it is a local broadcaster, whereas Hot-FM is on relay from Townsville.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

The National Party notes that the scope of this inquiry includes the services provided by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The ABC is a vital source of news and information for people in country and regional Australia. In some cases, especially in remote areas, it is the only source. Yet its services too have been rationalised and networked to a considerable degree over recent years and there is currently speculation that ABC services to country areas are to be further curtailed, with a reduction in the amount of radio and television news and current affairs programmes to the regions (see attached *Sydney Morning Herald* article of 18.10.00).

The Federal Leader of the National Party and Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, expressed the concern of the Party in a letter of the Managing Director of the ABC, Jonathan Shier, on September 14 2000 (*copy attached*). In that letter, Mr Anderson highlighted 'the increasing trend towards national networking/syndication of news bulletins by the commercial sector also threatens to further diminish regional access to timely and relevant information, underlining the critical role fulfilled by the ABC.

He further stated: 'We regard as fundamental the preservation of a news and current affairs structure that delivers distinctly at regional, state and national level. Needless to say, the continuance of specific rural programming is essential in the form of the Country Hour, regional bulletins and Landline.'

The National Party of Australia supports these views totally. We submit that, in the face of diminishing local *commercial* radio broadcasting in country and regional Australia, the ABC must maintain and increase its ability to present local news and community information, as well as provide national and international news and current affairs programmes to people throughout these regions.

Further comment on Terms of Reference

Given the views expressed in this submission, the National Party believes the content of commercial radio services in regional and rural Australia is losing relevance to local communities, and is therefore inadequate.

Certainly, country people should have access to national and international news and information and radio talk shows and this is being provided through networked programming. The Party accepts that stations networked through group ownership can provide a more sophisticated radio service than an independent, locally owned station.

But if such sophistication diminishes local content opportunity and air time – which the National Party believes is the case – then the radio station is not serving the local community adequately.

We contend that the trend in radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia is self evident and continuing.

While some additional jobs may be created in network 'hub' centres, there is undeniable loss of jobs in communities whose radio stations have been drawn into networked production. Those local stations were traditionally strong training grounds for broadcasters and others in the radio industry.

The Party believes networking of radio programming in non-metropolitan Australia has a detrimental effect on people and businesses because of the diminution of local broadcasting and content, particularly in areas including local news, sport, community service announcements, weather and stock reports, emergency service announcements and advertising.

New technologies, such as digital radio, will no doubt have the potential to enhance the reception quality of radio services, particularly in remote areas. But it is questionable whether such technologies will increase the amount of local radio broadcasting. Also, new technologies tend to reach rural areas last. The quality and content of today's country radio services must be thoroughly assessed and addressed and the maintenance of adequate local broadcasting must be a core requirement for the future.

Recommendations

The National Party of Australia makes the following recommendations to the Inquiry:

- (1) A detailed review be undertaken into the impact of the Broadcasting Services Act 1982 to establish the extent of erosion of local programme services across non-metropolitan Australia
- (2) A minimum amount of local content be a requirement of gaining and retaining a regional broadcasting licence; licences be reviewed every 12 months to ensure compliance with local content criteria
- (3) The Australian Broadcasting Corporation be required to maintain a comprehensive broadcasting service throughout non-metropolitan Australia to deliver local news and community information as well as national and international news and current affairs programmes.

The National Party of Australia thanks the Committee for its consideration of this submission.

October 23 2000



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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
MELBOURNE, VIC. 3002
TELEPHONE: 8651 8811

DON KILGOUR MLA
MEMBER FOR SHEPPARTON

fax:

**TO: PAUL DAVEY
FEDERAL SECRETARIAT**

FROM: Don Kilgour

RE: INQUIRY INTO RADIO SERVICES

Date: 12.10.00

No of pages incl cover: 1

I would like to make the following comment about local radio programming.

Since our local radio station 3SR changed to the FM band and became part of RG Capital Radio, there has been marked decline in local programming, with the station transmitting on satellite from Sydney during the afternoon, evening and throughout the night. This has resulted in the loss of local content formerly provided.

There are no longer announcers in the studio who can react to local issues or emergencies and there are no local information programs at all broadcast during those times.

I have a concern that the public no longer receives vital information. In the past in times of an emergency, i.e. floods, the whole community was kept up to date with flood information, assistance available etc., through the local radio station which was on air from Shepparton 24 hours a day. This no longer occurs.

There is no doubt that the local community FM station is doing an excellent job in providing niche programming for community groups etc., but unfortunately they do not have anywhere near the listening power of the commercial stations.

I believe strongly that the local community is not being catered for as in the past because of the changes in the broadcasting structure.

DON KILGOUR MLA
MEMBER FOR SHEPPARTON

WORK BOOT POWER LINES. STRUCTURAL STEEL WILL BE
to cafes, boat builders and structural steel will be
audited. In fact, just about anywhere electrical power



Employment, Training
and Industrial Relations
WORKPLACE HEALTH & SAFETY



bane, Canberra and Melbourne will
join the newlyweds at a reception at
the resort chaired by the groom's
brother.

Long-time family friend David
Lemmon will chair a reception at the
hotel's Spinnakers Room.

WAL/MPHS/SHOCKM

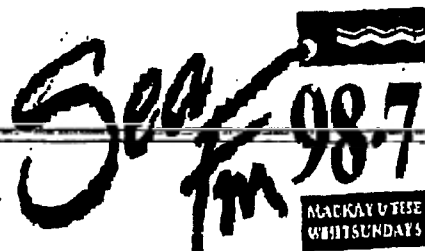
How can it be so hot... when nobody's home?

Did you know that Hot-FM is relayed to Mackay from Townsville?

SEA-FM IS LIVE IN MACKAY RIGHT ACROSS YOUR WORK DAY

~~From 10am to 6pm every work day, Radio Hot-FM is on relay from Townsville.~~

but from 10am to 6pm, right across your work day, 98.7 SEA-FM is on the
air "Live" from Victoria Street in Mackay. If you wanted your radio from
Townsville, you would have asked for it! 98.7 Sea-FM bringing you more
of everything... including real live local announcers!



This is where we live!

The RG CAPITAL RADIO NETWORK is passionately committed to excellence in local radio

Let the country speak

At least there is to be a Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in regional Australia, particularly in relation to networked programs from city centres.

Sydney listeners can dial twiddle between more than 30 stations, the majority of regional Australia has three. In our case the AM/FM bands are licensed to one proprietor who owns 29 stations across NSW and southern Queensland, so in reality we have two - ABC and network. This appears to be one industry which can operate as it likes with no ABA guidelines regarding local content or definition of local. My definition of "local" is common interest, be it in my town and district or the sharing of communication on common grounds.

We had a regional talkback program which linked rural NSW and southern Queensland voices and interests; we had an internationally respected country music industry program, both networking from the country for the country. Of no interest to one out of thirty stations, so they were dumped in a most offensive manner and be damned to listeners.

Do you realise that both the AM and FM stations in your areas - Armidale, Grafton, Dubbo, Mudgee, Moree, Gunnedah, Newcastle, Lismore, Taree, Inverell, Parkes and Tamworth are owned by the one company? Does that make us anything but a captive audience with no choice but to be milked like tethered goats by one station? Where does that leave the advertisers of our local business? Where does that leave country listeners' choice?

Does this give power to a monopoly to impose any style of programming it likes without regard to the taste or tradition of listeners? Country people have a different sense of humour, talk a different language, daily interests, music tastes, are more community minded and are reliant on primary industries for survival.

There is little interest by city listeners in regional activities, business, local community sport, widespread storms, highway blockages or power problems.

We even seem to be losing the identity of our country stations, with a Sydney call sign dominating. Local radio has supported us for 60 years.

If you are a no option advertiser on local radio or listen to your local stations, I urge everyone to write a letter to this Inquiry with your thoughts and comments about the direction of regional radio.

Half a page or 50 pages, but every letter will tell Parliament you are a listener to radio.

Let the country speak.

Protect our country traditions, manners, tastes, music, information, communication. The Inquiry closes October 27, 2000.

Write to Secretary, House Communications Committee, Parliament House, Canberra, 2600, ACT.

T. Penrose,
Bingara.

Local radio overhauled

A MAJOR overhaul of the Riverina's commercial radio network will see the centralisation of many services in Albury within the next few months.

The new "super hub" at Albury will draw together the 24 AM and FM stations in the Daily Mail Group's regional network including Wagga's 2WG-FM 93.1, 2LF Young and Griffith's 2RG-FM 99.7.

Forty additional staff members will be put on at the Albury station following the move, which will begin in the middle of next month, according to 2AY's general sales manager Rick Chapman.

Mr Chapman told *The Daily Advertiser* a new national news services would be produced by reporters at the hub along with basic services for the entire radio group, including accounting.

He said although a few people from each of the stations in the group would be moving to Albury because of the changes, basically "nothing would change" at the stations involved.

Yesterday, 2WG-Star FM manager Yvonne Braid said Wagga listeners could expect the same quality service they had become used to over the past 60 years.

"It will be a better service," she said.

"Currently we get programming and a

national news service out of Sydney - we rely on Sky Radio - but Albury will be providing us with a regional national news service.

"We will be doing what Sky does now and we will still have the shows such as John Laws; we won't be losing those."

"Nothing much will change in essence."

"We will still be based in the community and doing everything for the community that we have always done."

The centralisation of services in Albury comes at the same time as the Wagga studios are set to relocate to premises adjacent to Prime Television on Lake Albert Road.

At this stage it remains uncertain just how many of the current crew will remain in Wagga.

"We don't know the what or the when," Mrs Braid said yesterday.

"In some areas it will cost jobs but there have been a number of staff asked to apply for jobs at the Albury hub - so the status quo will be retained more or less."

Radio 2LF's general manager Graham "Cabbage" McDonald admitted several changes were in the pipeline, however, he refused to comment further yesterday.

DAILY ADVERTISER - Saturday, March 4, 2000 - P15
WAGGA WAGGA

WAGGA RADIO TARS DUMPED

By KEN GRIMSON

THREE of Wagga's best-known radio voices have fallen victim to the largest shake-up in the 68-year history of broadcaster 2WG-93.1StarFM.

Popular on-air presenters Steven Spink, Simon Smith and Jamie Chaux have been told their services will no longer be required after the completion of a local and network restructure in about six to eight weeks.

Also to be given his marching orders was copy writer Michael Sheldon.

Mr Spink and Mr Smith have

been household names in Wagga on 2WG for more than a decade, while Mr Chaux, known on air as Chucky, has been a popular presenter on 93.1StarFM for about a year.

"I was one of the people who was told their services will no longer be required," Mr Spink said yesterday when asked to comment on the changes.

"I was told by the station manager (Yvonne Braid) last Friday.

"I got out of there pretty early on Friday because I was more upset than I wanted to let on.

"I honestly believe Yvonne has tried to keep jobs in Wagga, but those higher than her have made those decisions."

Mr Spink, 42, has worked for 2WG since November, 1989, and recently celebrated 10 years at the radio station.

He currently works the 11am to 2pm slot as well as alternate Saturday mornings.

Mr Smith, who is currently production manager and part-time announcer, has been at 2WG about 13 years.

Long-time breakfast announcer Scott Levi has been told his job is safe.

Several other staff have not been told whether or not they will be retained.

Ironically, management broke the news of the lay-offs to affected staff the day after two new

announcers - Duncan Potts and Leighton Marshall - hit the airwaves on StarFM93.1...

Mr Spink said he had been told the redundancies would take effect after 2WG-93.1StarFM completed two major projects.

They are the move of studios from Fitzmaurice Street to the Prime Television building in Lake Albert Road and the owner of the radio stations, the British-owned Daily Mail Group (DMG), finalising program networking among its regional AM and FM radio stations.

DMG's plans will also affect staffing at its Griffith, Young and Orange radio stations.

Continued Page 4



Popular 2WG presenter Steven Spink's services are no longer required after a decade.

DAILY ADVERTISER. Wednesday, April 12, 2000. Pg 1.

Four dumped in radio shake-up

From Page 1

While Wagga will lose at least four jobs in the shake-up, Albury is expected to gain a number of new positions from becoming a network hub for DMG.

The Border Mail's former Albury headquarters is being fitted out for the role.

Rumours about the future of the commercial radio stations has been rife in Wagga for several weeks and were first reported in *The Daily Advertiser* on March 4.

"There was uncertainty in the air," Mr Spink said.

"We all knew there would be restructuring, but we did not know to what extent.

"Friday made it all crystal clear."

Mr Spink said he planned to stay in Wagga.

"I moved to Wagga and expected to stay here for only two years, but like a lot of people I fell in love with the place.

"I have my home and my partner here."

Management of 2WG did not return *The Daily Advertiser's* calls yesterday, but in March Mrs Braid said listeners could expect the same quality of service they had become used to from the radio stations.

DA. Wed. April 12, 2000. P. 4.



The Daily Advertiser

DAMAGE CONTROL

Staff hits threaten to make local commercial radio just a memory

By SHANNON EURELL

EXECUTIVES of local broadcaster 2WG-93.1StarFM are in damage control after its parent company, British-owned Daily Mail Group (DMG), bought a Sydney radio licence for a record \$155 million this week.

The purchase comes just weeks after DMG dumped several staff members in Wagga.

The Riverina's commercial radio network is currently in the middle of a major overhaul which will eventually see the centralisation of services at Albury.

DMG Radio's Paul Thompson, who made the final bid for the first commercial radio licence offered in Sydney in 12 years, said this week \$155 million was not too much to pay.

The multi-million dollar price tag only covers the cost of the licence.

The group will have to spend millions more on headquarters, equipment including transmitters, and other expenses.

Expressing his concern about the shake-up, well-known Wagga radio voice Barry Anderson said he thought the move would be the beginning of the demise of local commercial radio.

However, a representative from Wagga's community radio station said the volunteer organisation sees the overhaul of 2WG as a way for them to take on the role as Wagga's only truly local radio provider.

"Strong regional centres need a strong radio presence and 2WG has provided that for about 70 years," chairman of the

committee of management of FM107, Allan Norris, said yesterday. "We have historically complemented 2WG, but now it's like we'll be the only local station."

He said the thing that kept radio successful over the years was "localism", and on-air presenters became local personalities in their own right.

The Daily Advertiser revealed last month popular on-air presenters Steven Spink and Simon Smith had been told their services would no longer be required after the completion of local and network restructuring by DMG.

Jamie "Chucky" Chaux, who has been with 93.1StarFM for the past year, and copywriter Michael Sheldon were also given their marching orders.

Ironically, management broke the news of the layoffs to the affected staff the day after two new announcers

Duncan Potts and Leighton Marshall - hit the airwaves as 93.1StarFM's new breakfast crew.

"2WG was built on these local personalities and they have been shoved aside,"

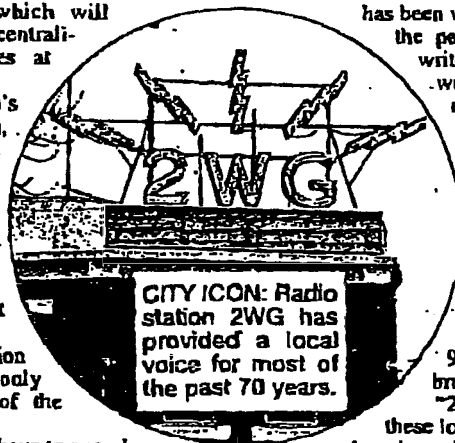
Mr Norris said.

He said FM107, formerly 2AAA, now provided the only radio service in Wagga which was a true local voice.

"We are managed by locals, our decisions are made by locals and we have 80 local people who volunteer their time to us," Mr Norris said.

"We are the only (local radio station) that lives and breathes and shares the aspirations of the local community."

He said he would be very surprised if the people of Wagga were not as disappointed as he was by the decisions of DMG.



Future of local commercial radio under threat

From Page 1

"It might be the death of local commercial radio but it comes as a great opportunity for us," he said.

"It's not our intention to replicate or duplicate what 2WG has done but it is a big chance for us."

Speaking to *The Daily Advertiser*, DMG's southern regional general manager Garry Loddin said the company will be spending a significant amount of money in the area.

"The most important thing that has been overlooked is that DMG has spent \$14 million improving systems and upgrading in regional areas," Mr Loddin said.

"That is the single biggest amount spent on regional radio. We're spending more money now on regional stations, particularly in Wagga, than ever before. We are just working towards bringing metropolitan quality radio to regional Australia. "The quality of

announcers will be better and local news will still be provided."

Mr Loddin said generally speaking staff changes in regional areas had been minimal.

He also said the company had not gleaned money from regional areas to fund the purchase of the Sydney radio licence.

"They are separate issues ... they are entirely unrelated," Mr Loddin said. Mr Anderson, a former 2WG

announcer, said he was concerned with the loss of local jobs as a result of the shake-up.

"I'm a firm believer in localism in radio," Mr Anderson said. "I think this will be the undoing of radio."

"They are doing a lot of talented people out of work."

With 26 years experience in radio, the majority of it locally, Mr Anderson said he felt the focus on local issues would be diminished signifi-

cantly with the move to Albury.

"Are they going to be looking at the Murrumbidgee River in Albury? No, they'll be looking at the Murray," he said.

A 2WG-91.1 StarFM station executive yesterday denied the station had been decimated.

The executive said two new sales staff have just been put on, making 21 people who will make the move to the Prime Television studios.

Politics played down as ABC's radio programs hunt listeners

Anne Davies

The ABC's signature radio current affairs programs - AM and PM - are set for a major overhaul next year, which will give more emphasis to business reporting and less emphasis to politics and economics.

PM is also likely to be shortened and will include "outpoints" so that individual stations can choose whether to run the entire program.

The proposals, now under discussion at the highest levels of the ABC, are contained in a confidential memo obtained by the Herald. Dated October 12, it was written by the head of local networks, Mr Michael Mason, and addressed to Mr John Cameron, deputy director of news and current affairs.

While the memo reveals that some of the worst fears about the future of AM and PM are unfounded - ALP Senator Chris Schacht told Parliament earlier this year there were plans to slash the programs to 10 minutes and make them optional - the two popular current affairs programs are nonetheless in for major change.

If accepted - the accompanying email says there is "broad agreement on directions" - AM

Nearly \$1m paid out to retrenched executives

The ABC has paid out nearly \$1 million in termination payments to two senior managers who were retrenched earlier this year, as part of managing director Mr Jonathan Shier's management overhaul.

The cost of the terminations are revealed in the ABC's 1999-2000 annual report, tabled in Parliament yesterday.

Mr Shier announced earlier this year that he was parting company with the head of national networks, Mr Andy Lloyd-James, and the head of news and current affairs, Mr Paul Williams.

While the report does not reveal the names of particular executives and their payouts, it is clear from the notes that two members of the

old executive team were paid \$560,000 and \$870,000 and that these figures included a total of \$973,762 in termination payments. This compares with \$227,314 in the previous year.

A figure of \$430,000 for the managing director for 1999-2000, up \$100,000 on the previous year, is Mr Brian Johns's salary plus termination payments and entitlements, not Mr Shier's salary, an ABC spokesman said yesterday. Mr Shier's salary is not apparent from the report.

The report also reveals more than \$2 million in "separation and redundancy" payments, which is significantly less than in previous years when the ABC was dramati-



When Mr Shier, left, came in, Mr Lloyd-James, centre and Mr Williams went out.

cally downsized. But the bill is expected to rise with the full impact of Mr Shier's restructuring in the next financial year.

The annual report said the ABC had been operating within its ap-

propriation of \$632.4 million (this includes transmission costs) and had received an unqualified audit certificate on its accounts.

But the directors noted that "the ABC is confronting real and

immediate challenges in the next year, not least of which is funding".

"The organisation needs to make the most of the multi-channelling and datacasting opportunities offered by digital legislation and providing real services without additional funding for this purpose," they said.

The release of the annual report comes just a week before the ABC board meets to consider a detailed submission from Mr Shier on this financial year's budget.

The ABC is awash with rumours of significant cuts to key program areas, including a \$10 million cut to news and current affairs.

Anne Davies

will move away from politics and economics into a much wider array of programs while PM will be even more radically reshaped to become a 20-minute program followed by a half hour devoted to a specialist business show.

"There has been strong emphasis on politics on AM and Early AM, as well as on big-end-of-town economics," the memo says.

"There is a need for the audience to be given a much wider range of subjects to reflect the communities' interests, aspirations and activities."

The memo lists health, business, technology, social change, and other topics identified by audience research as areas to be included in the revamped AM.

Mr Mason also wants two

30-second local windows in AM to allow the insertion of local weather and traffic details.

PM is in for much more radical surgery. The memo proposes the program be cut to 20 minutes instead of 50 minutes from 6.10 pm to 7 pm.

"PM is too long. This is a unanimous view," Mr Mason said in his memo. "Quality of content

is variable with some stories verging on the ponderous."

Mr Mason proposes that the second half hour be turned over to a business program which should endeavour "to attract the country's business and industry leaders as listeners and participants in the program".

More controversially, he also wants the the program to include

"outpoints" which would allow each station to present it in smaller blocs and at different times, although the program would be prepared for broadcast in its entirety.

Mr Mason told the Herald yesterday that the ABC was in the process of reviewing all content and the matter was far from resolved.

Corrections

References to a court case involving the estate of the department store family patriarch, Mrs. June



copy

The Hon John Anderson MP
Deputy Prime Minister
Minister for Transport and Regional Services
Leader National Party of Australia

14 SEP 2000

Mr Jonathan Shier
Managing Director
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
C/- Board Secretariat
7th floor, 700 Harris Street
ULTIMO NSW 2007

Fax: 9333 5482

Dear Mr Shier

I write to appraise you formally of the concerns held by the National Party of Australia -- parliamentary and organisational - over the prospective restructuring of the ABC's news and current affairs programming.

These concerns were discussed in some detail by the National Party's federal management committee on Friday 8th September and earlier in the week by the Party's federal parliamentary representatives.

You will be aware of media comments I have made on this issue.

The National Party is particularly concerned that any restructure of programming within the ABC not diminish the access people in regional, rural and remote Australia have to full and comprehensive news and current affairs services.

The Party urges ABC management to give full weight to the important and unique role that the ABC fulfils as an information provider to people in non-metropolitan areas, and ensure that this role is reinforced. I cannot impress on you too forcefully the importance country people place on ABC services, both radio and television.

For many people in country Australia, and especially those in the more remote areas, the ABC is not just their preferred news and current affairs provider; it is their only regular source of national news and views.

Many areas are not served adequately by commercial radio or TV, regional newspapers are published infrequently and are locally focused, and metropolitan newspapers often become available days after publication, if at all. The increasing trend towards national networking/syndication of news bulletins by the commercial sector also threatens to further diminish regional access to timely and relevant information, underlining the critical role fulfilled by the ABC.



1901-2001

The telecommunications revolution offers some real prospects of providing enhanced news and current affairs services to regional Australians, but the National Party does not believe the "market" is likely to provide such services within a reasonable period. While I recognise that the ABC is developing a suite of internet services, the reality remains for many country people that the internet is not a time-efficient or cost-effective tool. It is certainly not an adequate substitute for public broadcasting.

It would be easy to overlook the unique role the ABC plays in regional Australia, if viewed from a perspective where one has access to multiple sources of information, which of course, very many country people do not. When examined in the context of there being an absence of commercial alternatives, it becomes obvious that the ABC fulfils a significant social charter to inform the community - and that, of course, is why it was established as a public broadcaster. The rationale for its existence has not changed and in the view of the National Party, neither has its importance. This is why regional Australians are so attached to the ABC, despite what many country people would frankly describe to you as a distinct left-wing bias in its commentary on current affairs. It is the breadth of the service that helps counterbalance this particular worry.

A specific example of the unique contribution made by the ABC was The 7.30 Report's role as the major source of critical analysis of the One Nation phenomenon. I believe it played a vital role in injecting balance into the perception of that party in country Australia.

The ABC is in a very literal sense a window to the nation and the world for country people. It is the width of the "window" - that is, the diversity of its programming that is what the National Party believes must be maintained.

We regard as fundamental the preservation of a news and current affairs structure that delivers distinctly at the regional, state and national level. Needless to say, the continuance of specific rural programming is essential in the form of the Country Hour, regional bulletins and Landline. We also regard as imperative the presentation of news and critical analysis within essentially the current timeframe because it is timely and is well suited to the needs of country people.

I would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on these concerns with you and members of the Board.

Yours sincerely



JOHN ANDERSON

Cc Donald McDonald AO