

The beauty of having a broadcast you can hear is that you can place your bets then go home and listen to them on the radio and be with the family...Now twenty years on we can't even hear them. They call that progress. We can land a man on the moon but we can't hear a race.¹

Background

The ABC's regional radio racing service

- 1.1 On June 30 1998, after many years of service, the ABC discontinued its regional radio racing service. The decision was the final step in a series of moves to withdraw its radio racing service. Originally broadcasting racing across Australia, the ABC had discontinued racing broadcasts in Canberra and parts of New South Wales in 1979, in Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne in the early 1980s, in Brisbane in 1984/85 and in Sydney in 1987.² The service to Tasmania, according to the Tasmanian Government, also ceased in 1987.³
- 1.2 According to the ABC, its regional radio racing service was introduced for listeners in regional areas who had no other source of racing broadcasts. The service provided coverage of the Sydney, Melbourne and relevant capital city race meetings on Saturday afternoons and public holidays to regional listeners in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

1 Submission No 8, Vol 1, p 8 (L Crane)

2 Submission No 156.03, Vol 3, p 795 (ABC)

3 The ABC gives the date for the cessation of the service in Tasmania as 1979. Submission No.156.03, Vol 3, p 795 (ABC)

- 1.3 Originally part of the Saturday afternoon sports program, from 1991 the race broadcasts were part of the ABC's *Grandstand* program,⁴ a program providing commentary, updates and results on a wide range of sports and analysis of sports issues. 'Regular ABC employees called the Sydney and Melbourne races. In some states, contract race callers were engaged on Saturday afternoons and in others, calls were fed directly from the course, or from the commercial radio racing station in the relevant capital city.'⁵

The referral of the inquiry

- 1.4 The decision to discontinue the regional radio racing service evoked a strong and passionate response from racing enthusiasts in regional and remote parts of Australia. On the 15 June 1999, in response to this reaction, Senator the Hon Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, referred to us the terms of reference for an inquiry into the impact of the decision by ABC Radio to discontinue its radio racing service.

Inquiry process

- 1.5 The inquiry was widely advertised in the print media between 12–21 July 2000. In addition to the advertisements, state governments, TABs, racing broadcasters and national and state racing bodies and associations were contacted directly and invited to make submissions.
- 1.6 The Committee received 208 submissions, as listed in Appendix 1. A number of the major players including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) lodged supplementary submissions in response to requests for further information. In addition to the submissions, we also received approximately 200 form letters and a petition with 500 signatories. Submissions and form letters came from right across regional and remote Australia with dozens of communities represented in some way.
- 1.7 In the course of this inquiry, the Committee travelled to Brisbane, Melbourne, Hobart, Sydney and Barraba, NSW. We also took evidence at a number of public hearings in Canberra. Evidence gathering took the form of public hearings, round table discussions and informal meetings. Hearings and witnesses are listed at Appendix 3.
-

4 Prior to 1991 the race calls were broadcasts during the Saturday afternoon Sports program.

5 Submission No 156, Vol 2, p 521 (The ABC)

- 1.8 The inquiry generated three volumes of submissions and 289 pages of transcript. Copies of transcripts and volumes of submissions are available from the secretariat. Transcripts of evidence for the public hearings are available on the internet.

A people's inquiry

- 1.9 At the outset, we acknowledge that we were surprised by the strength of the response to this inquiry. Contrary to the ABC's assessment of the public response to this inquiry as demonstrating 'a strong but small level of interest'⁶, for a parliamentary inquiry, the number of submissions received was substantial. Public inquiries typically draw submissions from professional and industrial organisations, government departments, community groups and academics. Although these groups were well represented, the fact that the majority of submissions to this inquiry came from private citizens is a distinctive feature of this inquiry and indicative of the intensity of the loss that has been felt in rural, regional and remote areas as a result of the ABC's decision to discontinue its regional radio racing service.

Value of the ABC's service and the impact of its discontinuation

- 1.10 Despite the ABC's own reservations about its quality⁷, the ABC's regional radio racing service was highly valued by racing enthusiasts across Australia. Submissions received during this inquiry sang the program's praises in heartfelt terms. The following extract from a submission encapsulates the views of racing enthusiasts denied access to radio racing coverage by the ABC's decision.

For listeners in remote areas, unlike listeners in large regional towns and cities, the Saturday afternoon broadcast of three state racing on the ABC radio was the only form of entertainment available in many cases and had become a ritual. In the outback; workers away from home, travellers, truck drivers and tourists were tuned into the football/cricket and the races over vast areas of Australia. The service was incomparable and comprehensive with skilled callers and commentators being co-ordinated by the

6 Transcript of evidence, Canberra 18 October 1999, p 137 (Ms Sue Howard)

7 Submission 156, Vol 2, p 522 (ABC)

man in the chair in such a way as to bring to the listener a complete coverage of all sporting information.

Listening to the ABC racing service had been a bush tradition for over 50 years and its axing, despite an outcry from the outback, is a reflection of the narrow minded insensitivity and the uninformed ignorance of the board to the impact its withdrawal has had on our lives.⁸

- 1.11 Such is the intimacy of the medium of radio, that many people developed strong attachment to the familiar voices of the race callers themselves.

Until the cessation of the ABC Racing Service, people locally did not feel left out too much because their 'racing friends' of many years standing were there with them come hail, rain or shine every Saturday. A cult following had virtually been established, even for people who did not bet. To be able to work in the garden while listening to the racing with David Morrow and Mick Ko'cas in Sydney, Greg Miles in Melbourne and Paul Dolan in Brisbane and receiving the football results at the same time made the time pass quite quickly. Now we have no choice but to listen to boring interviews and re-hashed news stories from the previous week.⁹

- 1.12 In a similar vein, the Chairman of the Bega Valley Health Council described the special place the ABC's race broadcasts had in the lives of many in hospitals, nursing homes and aged care facilities as follows.

Many have pointed out that these ABC broadcasts were some of their closest, and in many cases, their only 'friends'. These residents have no other options available to them and now, they say, their weekends are very long and miserable.¹⁰

- 1.13 The sense of loss by racing enthusiasts expressed in the submissions was palpable.

Since the ABC ceased its regional racing broadcasts one thing is for sure. IT IS NOT AUSTRALIA ANYMORE.¹¹

...the ABC's decision to drop its broadcasting of racing on Saturday's and Public holidays has left a giant void in the industry...¹²

8 Submission No 20, Vol 1, p 27 (Mrs Neilson et al)

9 Submission No 47, Vol1, p 94 (Mr Laurie Ryan)

10 Submission No 47, Vol 1, p 95 (Mr Laurie Ryan)

11 Submission No 21, Vol 1, p 28 (Mr Robert Homan)

12 Submission No 26, Vol 1, p 48 (Mr Mark Levy)

My mother is now 86 years old and a racing fan all her life. She is now confined to a wheel chair and almost blind. One of her pleasures of listening to the races, has been taken from her because of the ABC decision not to broadcast racing.¹³

- 1.14 The decision by the ABC baffled many who could not understand that for all the developments in recent years in communications technology, they have less access to race broadcasts than was available decades ago.

Even on the tiny crystal sets in New Guinea during the war the reception of races by Radio Australia was much better than the FM station in Kempsey.¹⁴

I am a family man and love to spend my weekends with my family, be it picnics, sport, walks, drives or fishing. The first thing that ever went in my bag was the radio for the Saturday race coverage! ... Race coverage in country areas was better when I was just a kid, thirty odd years ago!! It is the new Millenium, with computers, mobile phones, jets, space shuttles, digital this and that and I STILL CAN'T LISTEN TO A BLOODY RACE!¹⁵

As far back as 1938 I can remember as a young lad my father and mates in Bamboo Creek 40 miles from Marble Bar and 1600 kilometres from Perth listening to ABC shortwave radio broadcasts of races in Perth and Melbourne each Saturday. Now some 61 years later we can not get a race broadcast 200 kilometres from Perth unless we purchase special expensive equipment and pay a fee well above the amount we wager on a Saturday afternoon. The other alternative I find unappealing is to travel 25 kilometres to the nearest TAB and sit in the hotel bar all afternoon to hear the races.¹⁶

It is an indictment on the Government and its commitment to people living and working in the outback that I could listen to race broadcasts in Ora Banda almost 50 years ago and now with technology available today no race broadcasts can be received.¹⁷

- 1.15 For others, the cessation of the ABC's racing service represented yet another loss of services to the bush and evoked strong feelings of betrayal as illustrated in the extracts from submissions below.

13 Submission No 57, vol 1, p 131 (Mr Ron Sullivan)

14 Submission No 31, Vol 1, p 58 (Mr George Hitchins)

15 Submission No 3, Vol 1, p 3 (Mr Mike Taylor)

16 Submission No 51, Vol 1, p 100 (Mr Stan Chegwidden)

17 Submission No 52, Vol 1, p 102 (Mr Don Hancock)

I, and I believe, the vast majority of Rural Australia, view the ABC's decision on radio racing services, as just another 'kick in the guts' for country people, and again sends a sad message that country folk are to be seen and treated as **second class citizens**.¹⁸

The provision of the ABC Racing Service was a common link between all Australians and provided current information of one of Australia's favourite and historical past times. With this service gone, the feelings of isolation, frustration and resentment are intensified against the bureaucracy and their lack of understanding of people outside the metropolitan areas.¹⁹

- 1.16 Clearly, the ABC's regional racing service was not, as described in the words of one listener, simply a service but 'represented a way of life and a direct involvement in the euphoria generated by the racing industry'.²⁰
- 1.17 Many submissions argued that the cessation of the ABC's regional radio racing service was not only a blow to a way of life but would have an impact on the industry in general. Racing as an industry makes a significant contribution to the economy both by means of direct financial contributions via state turnover taxes and also through providing employment. According to the WA TAB, for instance, in the last ten years the racing industry has contributed \$1 billion to the State economy and is 'one of the largest employers, supporting the livelihood of 11,000 people each year, including TAB agents and staff, owners and breeders, trainers and jockeys, officials, and other associated employers such as animal feed manufacturers and veterinarians'.²¹
- 1.18 In the course of this inquiry, we recognised the strong link between gambling and radio race broadcasts. However, various opinions were expressed about the impact of the cessation of the ABC's regional racing service on wagering. The New South Wales Country Racing Council, for instance, reported a severe drop in turnover since the cessation of the ABC racing broadcasts and stated that it believed that the withdrawal of the service had had a 'significant detrimental effect on the interest in racing and on turnover'. According to the WA TAB, its statistics show that 'if its customers can't hear or see a race they are turned off having a bet'.²² A number of submissions confirmed this view. Conversely, the TAB Limited

18 Submission No 21, Vol 1, p 24 (Mr Robert Homan)

19 Submission No 66, Vol 1, p 148 (Mr Donald Hunter)

20 Submission No 43, Vol 1, p 91 (Parkes Sports Council)

21 Submission No 43, Vol 1, p 82 (WA TAB)

22 Submission No 43, Vol 1, p 90 (WA TAB)

claimed that it had not 'detected any significant variation in wagering patterns or turnover in the last (12) months'.²³

- 1.19 In the absence of hard evidence, and given that it was not a part of the terms of reference for this inquiry, we are unable to make any useful assessment of the impact of the decision on wagering and the consequent impact on employment and the economy in general. We do, however, take heart from the Australian Racing Board's evidence on this issue.

In the submission that the board has made, we have pointed to the economic importance of the industry, its taxation revenue, for government, its links with other sectors of industry—tourism, hospitality. As Mr Charlie has made the point, it is not being suggested that because the ABC has withdrawn its service, the industry will go into decline in any sort of significant measure. That is not the suggestion.²⁴

- 1.20 Although we are aware of the significant contribution that the racing industry makes to the economy, such matters have been amply dealt with in the Productivity Commission's recent report, *Australia's Gambling Industries*. Similarly, we have refrained from making any judgements about the problems associated with any form of gambling including betting on races as it is beyond the terms of reference of this inquiry.
- 1.21 Our role was to assess the impact of the ABC's decision on people living in some parts of regional, remote and rural Australia. The argument repeated frequently in the evidence that radio racing services were better twenty or more years ago is a strong one and we have endeavoured to find realistic ways of assisting people regain access to the radio racing broadcasts that they so highly value.

23 Submission No 159, Vol 2, p 556 (TAB Limited, NSW)

24 Transcript of evidence, 24 September 1999, Parramatta, p 79 (Mr Harding)