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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# **Local Voices**

**An Inquiry into Regional Radio**

House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts

September 2001

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## Foreword

As with many of the simple things in life, radio is a service that many of us take for granted. Radio is a voice that we turn to at different times for different reasons: for news and information and comment on a daily basis; for guidance and critical information during emergencies; for entertainment and relaxation, and for companionship. At times it is our focus; at other times, a reassuring background presence. Radio connects us to a wider world but it also, importantly, reflects back to us our immediate world, the place to which we belong.

Regional areas have been subjected to many changes in recent years. Technological and transport developments have built some 'bridges' between regional and metropolitan communities. Technological developments are also increasingly leading to services being delivered electronically. In many regional areas, this has led to the loss of institutions such as banks and government agencies which were an important part of the social and economic fabric of the area. Coupled with economic developments, such changes have represented a considerable loss to many communities.

The delivery of radio services in regional areas has also been profoundly affected by a combination of technological, economic and regulatory developments. Regional areas are still receiving radio services albeit with an increasing degree of networked, pre-recorded, automated and syndicated programming. These developments have led, in some instances, to more hours of broadcast and, in some instances, to a higher quality of programming — but at a price.

However, we are concerned that the changes are also leading to fewer local voices, which are the very essence of regional radio. This is occurring in enough instances for us to be convinced that warning bells are ringing for local radio in regional areas. Regional communities want services of the same quality that metropolitan areas receive. They do not, however, want to lose their own voice in the process.

While attending to the concerns of broadcasters and their needs for an environment that is conducive to providing radio services, we have focussed on the needs and aspirations of listeners. As networks have grown larger, and the

regulatory environment more responsive to entrepreneurial demand, listeners have been left out of the picture. We have endeavoured to put in place mechanisms to address this situation.

Having access to the radio spectrum carries with it responsibilities. We have made some specific recommendations aimed at ensuring broadcasters meet these responsibilities. We have also suggested mechanisms which will provide for more openness and transparency on the part of broadcasters so that communities will be better equipped to make their own judgements about the radio services they receive, and the ABA will be better informed when making its licensing decisions.

A number of submissions expressed concerns about specific decisions made by the ABA. As a result of earlier recommendations made by this Committee, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) is conducting an inquiry into the ABA's Licence Area Planning process. We understand that the ANAO will report in the near future and we anticipate that it will address a number of the concerns about ABA decision making that have been raised during this inquiry.

Many organisations and individuals have made a substantial contribution to the conduct of this inquiry. We appreciate the efforts that the radio industry, governments, community organisations and individuals have put into making submissions. We particularly appreciate the willingness of individuals to travel considerable distances to participate in public hearings and meetings.

I thank all my colleagues of the Communications, Transport and the Arts Committee for their high level of commitment to this inquiry, to former member Mr Colin Hollis and to our dedicated staff led by Grant Harrison and Janet Holmes.

**Paul Neville MP**  
**Chair**



## **Membership of the Committee**

**Chair** Paul Neville MP

**Deputy Chair** Steve Gibbons MP

**Members** Gary Hardgrave MP

Colin Hollis MP (to 9 Oct 2000)

Hon David Jull MP

Peter Lindsay MP

Kirsten Livermore MP (from 9 Oct 2000)

Stewart McArthur MP

Frank Mossfield MP

John Murphy MP

Stuart St Clair MP

## **Committee Secretariat**

**Secretary** Grant Harrison

**Inquiry Secretary** Janet Holmes

**Research Officer** Rachel Carew

**Administrative Officer** Katie Hobson





## **Terms of reference**

The following terms of reference were provided to the Committee by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on 7 September 2000:

The House of Representatives Communications Committee shall 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.



## List of abbreviations

ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACA	Australian Communications Authority
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
BSA	Broadcasting Services Act 1992
BSB	Broadcasting Services Bands
CBAA	Community Broadcasting Association of Australia
DCITA	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
DMG Group	DMG Radio Australia Pty Ltd
DRB	Digital Radio Broadcasting
FARB	Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters
IRB	Australian Association of Independent Regional Radio Broadcasters
NIRS	National Indigenous Radio Service
ntl	ntl Pty Ltd (the company which operates the National Transmission Network)

NTN	National Transmission Network
RCRS	Remote Commercial Radio Service
RGCR	RG Capital Radio Ltd
RPH	Radio for the Print Handicapped



# List of recommendations

## Access and diversity

### Recommendation 1

As a matter of high priority, the Minister for Communications, Technology and the Arts should establish a Radio Black Spots Program. The Program should be established along similar lines to the Television Black Spots Program. The program should apply to national and commercial radio services. First priority should be given to attempting to ensure all communities with 50 or more households have access to the most locally relevant ABC Local Radio Service and at least one commercial radio service. (paragraph 2.55)

### Recommendation 2

The ABC should commit to the establishment of a 10kW AM transmitter at Meekatharra, Western Australia, as a replacement for the short wave service that the ABC withdrew in 1994. If necessary, the Government should finance this project specifically in the 2002-03 Budget. (paragraph 2.71)

### Recommendation 3

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to enable communities in the RCRS zones which do not consider the service that they receive is adequate in terms of local relevance to be able to apply to retransmit another service, following the conduct of the audit process described in Chapter 3. (paragraph 2.94)

### Recommendation 4

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to

establish an additional category of broadcasting service relating to Indigenous broadcasting services. (paragraph 2.109)

#### **Recommendation 5**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should direct the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts to develop, in consultation with the ABA, RPH Australia, Radio for All Australians and other relevant organisations, a national strategy to ensure that people in non-metropolitan Australia have access to radio services for the print handicapped. (paragraph 2.118)

#### **Recommendation 6**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should establish a station manager employment and training scheme for the community broadcasting sector to allow community broadcasters to participate in accredited training courses. The scheme should be based on a self-help model in which Commonwealth funds are made available on a dollar for dollar basis to match locally generated funds. The level of Commonwealth funding should be capped at \$5,000 per station. (paragraph 2.133)

### **Local radio and commercial viability**

#### **Recommendation 7**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 to require all non-metropolitan commercial, community and narrowcast radio services to identify the originating source of programming when giving their call signs. (paragraph 3.27)

The ABC Board should determine that ABC regional radio services identify the originating source of programming when giving their call signs.

#### **Recommendation 8**

The Australian Broadcasting Authority should continue its survey of program formats on an ongoing basis ensuring that it identifies the source and degree of local news and community content.

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to require commercial radio licensees to report their program delivery operations and details of program formats to the ABA on an annual basis.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority should publish this material in full disaggregated according to licence areas. (paragraph 3.27)

**Recommendation 9**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should direct the ABA following the completion of the LAP process to conduct an audit of licence areas to determine the degree to which the planning process has provided for localism and diversity and the level of community satisfaction with the services in their area.

The Minister should ensure adequate resources are provided to the ABA to enable it to complete the audits within a reasonable time frame. (paragraph 3.157)

**Recommendation 10**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should direct the ABA not to issue any further new commercial licences in regional areas, following the completion of the LAP process, until an audit of that licence area has been completed. (paragraph 3.237)

**Recommendation 11**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the Broadcasting Services Act to make provision for a test of commercial viability to be included, following the completion of the LAP process, before the issue of new licences.

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should ensure that the ABA is provided with adequate resources to develop and implement the test. (paragraph 3.238)

**Recommendation 12**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the relevant legislation to extend the boundaries of the Broadcasting Services Bands part of the spectrum to encompass the frequencies used for s.40 licences. (paragraph 3.248)

**Recommendation 13**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 to have narrowcast licences restrict narrowcast licences to a particular format and for open narrowcast licensees to require permission from the ABA before substantially changing the format. (paragraph 3.256)

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## Responding responsibly: the role of radio in emergency situations

### Recommendation 14

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* with the object of requiring broadcasters to take responsibility for:

- ensuring the contact details for the relevant State Emergency Service contact person in the area are known to all relevant broadcasting staff at all times;
- any emergency service announcements considered necessary by an accredited emergency service organisation or other such body are broadcast; and
- providing to accredited emergency service organisations up-to-date contact details for staff with the authority to interrupt programmed radio services (particularly pre-recorded, automated and networked services) in order to broadcast emergency service announcements. (paragraph 4.54)

### Recommendation 15

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to require:

- that, as a condition of any broadcasting licence, broadcasters maintain properly developed emergency response plans; and
- the Australian Broadcasting Authority to regularly audit the emergency response plans maintained by broadcasters and check that the procedures in place would allow programmed services to be interrupted in the event of an emergency. (paragraph 4.55)

### Recommendation 16

The Minister for Defence, in conjunction with the Ministerial Council of Emergency Service Ministers, should develop protocols to ensure that radio and television station managers (or their delegates) are represented on local and regional State Emergency Service Committees and disaster response coordinating organisations. (paragraph 4.56)

### Recommendation 17

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should consider whether it would be appropriate to specify in legislation that, where broadcasting facilities are damaged in an emergency situation and where there is an expectation that broadcasters transmit emergency

service announcements, telecommunications providers should give priority to repairing damaged equipment, infrastructure or links to essential broadcasting equipment. (paragraph 4.62)

## **Digital Radio Broadcasting**

### **Recommendation 18**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should ensure that some of trials that are proposed for digital radio broadcasting are conducted in regional and remote areas. The Minister should stipulate the trials take into account the fortuitous coverage areas of AM services as a basis for the new digital service footprints or coverage areas. (paragraph 5.31)

### **Recommendation 19**

In the context of these trials, the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should also consider the potential application of the hybrid satellite/terrestrial technology being promoted by AsiaSpace with particular attention to the provision of radio services to moving vehicles. (paragraph 5.32)

### **Recommendation 20**

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should ensure that the community, Indigenous, Radio for the Print Handicapped broadcasters are included at all stages in the planning and implementation of digital radio. (paragraph 5.35)

## **Appendix A – Submissions**

## **Appendix B – List of Exhibits**

## **Appendix C – List of Hearings & Witnesses**

## **Appendix D - The Optimal Transmission Strategy**

## **Appendix E –Section 3 of the Broadcasting Services Act**

## **Appendix F – ABC Local Radio, Regional Rollout**



**Appendix G – ABA’s Policy for use of confidential licensee and commercial-in-confidence financial information**

