

Senator Nick Xenophon's Dissenting Report

ABC – A Bad Call Shutting Down of ABC Shortwave Radio

1.1 On 6 December 2016 the ABC announced that it was shutting down its long running short wave radio service. Just over month later the transmitters were switched off and receivers across northern Australia and the South Pacific went silent.

1.2 For Australian in remote parts of our vast nation it was their only service and one relied upon for basic news, information and entertainment.

1.3 For international audiences it provided impartial and reliable news and information and a point of connection to Australia.

1.4 In emergency situations, it was a service that was used to save both Australian and International lives.

1.5 The service has been turned off ostensibly to save a small amount of money—but comes at enormous cost.

Senate Examination

1.6 The Committee and Secretariat has done terrific work in its compilation of the facts relating to the history and great utility of the ABC's shortwave service and to reveal the shallow consideration of relevant issues by the ABC board before it ordered the service to be shutdown.

1.7 The report complements the good work carried out by the Senate Committee examining Senator McKenzie's ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill. This Inquiry also took evidence in relation to the shutdown of ABC Shortwave.

The Importance of Shortwave

1.8 An Inland Shortwave Radio Services was established in 1939 to transmit to the 5% of Australians that had no access to medium wave stations. It was established as 'Australia Calling' and in until 1950 was operated by the ABC and the Department of Information. Sole responsibility for the service transferred to the ABC in 1950. Over the years domestic shortwave ABC services operated from a number of sites; in WA, NT and QLD. From 1944, Radio Australia operated from Shepparton in Victoria. By the mid 1990's Radio Australia were broadcasting internationally in English and eight other languages to a wide audience throughout Asia, Papua New Guinea, the Pacific islands and Micronesia.

1.9 Mr Garry Cratt, Director of Tecsun Radios Australia (a company that imports and resells portable shortwave receivers) provided a useful and contemporary analysis of the audience derived from his extensive customer contact.

1.10 Australian audiences included:¹

- People travelling in remote parts of the NT, WA, NSW and SA. Examples include stockmen, mining camp operators, outback tour operators and 'Grey Nomads'.
- People travelling by boat around Australia and operators of commercial fishing vessels.
- People travelling overseas to locations such as Papua New Guinea, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines where Radio Australia signals propagated.

1.11 International audiences included:²

- People residing in the Pacific regions who want to listen to shortwave broadcasts as their own country has no or poor shortwave coverage.
- People residing in Pacific region who rely on weather reports such as cyclones, tsunami and earthquake warnings.

1.12 The importance of the service to some cannot be overstated. ABC Shortwave was not just about news, information and entertainment. To appreciate ABC Shortwave's true importance one only needs to consider the submission from the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu, the Honourable Charlot Salwai, who outlined how the people of Vanuatu relied on shortwave radio when Cyclone Pam struck in 2015. Prime Minister Salwai stated in his submission:

In times of crisis when other forms of media like FM and digital services are damaged or unavailable such communities rely on broadcasts safely transmitted from outside the disaster zone. This is exactly the role Radio Australia shortwave broadcasts played during Cyclone Pam... people around our nation relied on Radio Australia's shortwave broadcasts to stay up-to-date about the cyclone's progress and they took the thorough and expert advice on the shortwave service very seriously indeed. It is undoubtedly the case that Radio Australia's shortwave service helped save Ni-Vanuatu lives.

1.13 ABC shortwave radio also played a valuable role in providing information to communities during the civil disturbance that occurred in East Timor in the lead up to independence.

1.14 Closure of the service will impact significantly on Australia's near neighbours where these broadcasts have been a reliable source of news and current affairs and an important and unique connection to Australia.

1 Mr Garry Cratt, Tecsun Radios Australia, *Submission 7*, pp.1–2.

2 Mr Garry Cratt, Tecsun Radios Australia, *Submission 7*, pp.1–2.

A Valuable Foreign Policy Tool

1.15 A number of submissions and witnesses highlighted the foreign policy value of shortwave and provided examples of where it had positive impact. It was an effective tool in Australia's own 'soft power' toolbox and it beyond comprehension that the system has been shut down.

1.16 Documents I sought under Freedom of Information laws from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) earlier this year relating to the discussion that took between the ABC and DFAT in the lead up to the decision to shut the service down, show the dialogue between the two entities was disturbingly limited.

1.17 I gained no further comfort at hearing when the following exchange occurred between myself and Mr Daniel Sloper, First Assistant Secretary, Pacific Division, DFAT:

Senator XENOPHON: Does the department have a view about the importance of shortwave as an exercise in soft power? I am not sure what the lingo is in diplomatic speak. I mean something—having that level of Australian news or giving emergency news, which is what the Republic of Vanuatu highlighted in its submission—that does build bridges with communities. Does the department have a view about the benefit of that in terms of Australia's reputation in those countries?

Mr Sloper: We made clear to the ABC that we want them to continue to meet their international charter, that they need to continue coverage within the region, but we have not given a particular view about shortwave itself. We have left the decision about the technology to the ABC. We do not have the expertise on the particular technology.

1.18 I asked Mr Andrew Byrne, First Assistant Secretary, Public Diplomacy, Communications and Scholarships Division, DFAT, a further questions relating to DFAT's knowledge of Chinese shortwave activities in the region.

Senator XENOPHON: China has been expanding shortwave broadcasts, has it not, in the region?

Mr Byrne: I am not sure about that.

1.19 The question was answered by Mr Dobell later in the hearing:

...My understanding of China's shortwave investment is that it is taking up as many of allotments of shortwave frequencies and shortwave slots as it possibly can. Its investment in broadcasting is ratcheting up at a very large rate. So my answer is that China is investing in shortwave in a big way.

1.20 As Australia ramps down, China is filling the void. This is Australia's mistake and Australia's mistake alone. Its impact on a nation such as Timor-Leste cannot be understated.

A Bad Call

1.21 The Committee report deals with the size of the ABC Shortwave audience prior to shut down. The ABC suggested the size was relatively small; others suggested the ABC had significantly underestimated the size. What is clear is that there was no serious effort made to actually measure audience size. I am of the view, considering all of the evidence, the audience size was much larger than the ABC calculated.

1.22 But even if the ABC were right (which I doubt) they did not factor the foreign policy importance of the service. They should have factored this into their decision, noting the requirement in the ABC charter to provide a 'comprehensive broadcasting services', and they did not. By shutting down shortwave, the ABC has failed the 'comprehensive' test.

1.23 The same can be said in relation to ABC's Shortwave international audience, nothing the second requirement in the charter to 'transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment'. By shutting down shortwave, the ABC has failed the charter a second time. The ABC Board should be condemned for this decision.

1.24 Finally, the decision to shut down ABC Shortwave is a significant foreign policy failure. The board cannot really be blamed for this oversight; foreign policy is a responsibility of the whole of government. In allowing the ABC Board to shut down ABC shortwave, the Government has failed.

1.25 Shortwave must be restored. I urge all of my Senate colleagues to support the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill.

1.26 Finally, I want to pay special thanks to long distance truck driver Mr Gary Williams of South Australia who alerted me to this issue. Mr Williams, on his regular 6000 km round trip from Adelaide to Darwin, and the many hundreds, if not thousands, like him can no longer receive ABC radio on a significant part of journey. At the Darwin public hearing into the ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill, Mr Williams responded to the ABC's suggested remedy plainly and simply, stating:

Mobile phone coverage only covers about 2,200 kilometres of the round trip. To be told by people at the ABC that you can access ABC via the app on your phone or over the internet or by VAST satellite service is physically impossible. You just cannot do it.

Recommendation 1

That the bill be passed.

**Senator Nick Xenophon
Senator for South Australia**