



Submission by Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc.

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to the

**Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and
Trade
Human Rights Sub-Committee**

**INQUIRY INTO HUMAN RIGHTS AND GOOD
GOVERNANCE EDUCATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC
REGION**

6th December 2002

The ABC's overseas broadcasting arm Radio Australia (RA) fulfils the national public broadcaster's statutory responsibility to broadcast to countries outside Australia programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs. In carrying out its role, Radio Australia provides Australia's neighbours in the Asia Pacific region with valuable information and analysis on human rights and good governance.

Radio Australia should be resourced to enable it to play a stronger role and to reach more people in the Asia Pacific region:

- **Radio is an effective means of communication.** It is an accessible, fast and effective medium for delivering information, an important educational tool which is presently under-utilised, and can provide interactivity through talkback.
- **Information broadcast by radio has the potential to reach large numbers of people.** Radio is the primary means of communication in some parts of the Asia Pacific region. The accessibility of radio to large numbers of people in the region, particularly through shortwave, is far greater than other mediums.
- **Radio is cost-effective.** Compared with other mediums, such as television, radio is relatively cheap to provide.
- **RA has the trust and respect of Australia's neighbours in the Asia Pacific region.** As an independent broadcaster in the Asia Pacific region, Radio Australia is one of the most significant voices providing insight and Australian perspectives on a broad range of important matters, including human rights and good governance. It plays an important role in strengthening Australia's relationship with neighbours in its region.
Prior to cuts to its programs and transmission capacity in 1996, RA was held in high regard by large and broad audiences. Further, the broadcaster had a strong following and was highly valued by a generally well-educated audience, which included leaders and opinion-makers in the region.
- **RA's approach is effective.** Importantly, RA has the understanding, experience and respect for the interests and needs of citizens in other countries which result in the broadcaster delivering quality information in a manner which is not preaching or condescending and does not alienate its audience.

Major and ongoing funding cuts to the ABC's triennial funding since 1996 and the Federal Government's closure and subsequent sale of the powerful Cox Peninsula transmission system have seriously eroded Radio Australia's service. Since 1996 there has been only partial and temporary restoration of funding for RA. The broadcaster has innovated and achieved much with inadequate funds. However, RA's production capacity and audience reach remain seriously depleted, and its future levels of activity insecure.

Please refer to the attached Friends of the ABC information paper, *Radio Australia – RA's Role, Standing and Capacity* for further information on Radio Australia's role, capacity and its standing in the Asia Pacific region.

Friends of the ABC Recommendations to the Inquiry:

1. That the ABC be granted funding and guaranteed access to transmission facilities, including shortwave, to enable Radio Australia to produce and broadcast at least to RA's extent and reach prior to 1996.
Further, that funding and access to shortwave transmission be granted in a manner that ensures the independence and integrity of RA, as an arm of the national public broadcaster, is not compromised, and which enables RA to maintain and build audience trust by providing a reliable, ongoing service. Audience respect and therefore the impact of RA will be undermined if RA comes to be perceived as a propaganda tool of the Australian government.
2. That the ABC be granted additional funds to:
 - produce and broadcast material and programs which provide a broad range of information and opinion so that RA provides perspectives and information different from and in addition to local radio content;
 - enable RA to assist and work with local community and independent public radio broadcasters in the Asia Pacific region in the development and broadcast of suitable material; and
 - develop and conduct, in consultation with local journalists and editors, training for media managers and workers in human rights and good governance issues, which in turn will empower them in the messages they deliver to audiences.

Attachments:

- *Radio Australia - RA's Role, Standing and Capacity* (Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc. information paper)
- information sheet on Friends of the ABC

GS:Submissions/Inquiries

RADIO AUSTRALIA
RA's Role, Standing and Capacity
Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc. Information Paper

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A. FRIENDS OF THE ABC POSITION ON RA

As an independent and respected broadcaster in the Asia Pacific region, the ABC's Radio Australia (RA) is one of the most significant voices for Australia's interest and for Australia's relationship with neighbours in its region. The accessibility of radio to large numbers of people in the Asia Pacific region, particularly through shortwave, is far greater than other mediums. Compared with other mediums, such as television, radio is relatively cheap to provide.

On what has occurred to RA, Friends of the ABC says:

- A significant Australian asset was decimated by funding cuts to the ABC which resulted in RA's decreased multi-lingual program capacity. It is shortsighted of the Australian Government to under-utilise, the single most effective diplomatic, trade and cultural bridge between Australia and the countries of Asia and the Pacific.
- It is irresponsible of the Australian Government to forgo use of the Cox Peninsula transmitter system, an important means for communicating with countries in our region, and to provide an overseas broadcaster with the facility to promote foreign interests to the detriment of Australia.
- It is contrary to the national interest for Australia to choose to give up the advantage of a 50-year reputation for reliability and honesty in a highly competitive international broadcasting field. RA will not be effective if it is simply called back into operation to broadcast in targeted areas in times of crisis or unrest.

FABC wants: funding and guaranteed access to transmission facilities, including shortwave, to enable RA to produce and broadcast at least to RA's extent and reach prior to 1996. RA must be funded and guaranteed access to shortwave transmission in a manner that ensures the independence and integrity of RA, as an arm of the national public broadcaster, is not compromised, and which enables RA to maintain and build audience trust by providing a reliable, ongoing service.

B. RA's ROLE

ABC Act 1983 specifies one function of the ABC as being:

- 6.(1)(b) to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs and television programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:
- (i) encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
 - (ii) enable Australian citizens living or traveling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs.

ABC Role and Importance

- Various government bodies, including the ABC, were responsible for the ABC at different times in its early years. In 1950 it was transferred back to the ABC by administrative decision. It appears the Menzies Government believed the credibility of RA would be enhanced if it was part of the independent national broadcaster, rather than the United States model, with the *Voice of America* being an arm of government.
- Prior to funding cuts and the closure of Cox Peninsula, RA provided a long established and respected voice into Asia and the Pacific in English and other languages of the region. Through shortwave, satellite and internet, RA reached our populated neighbours - many millions of people in Asia and the Pacific, and beyond.
- Broadcasting in Asia Pacific region languages, RA is an invaluable strategic asset and is critical to perceptions of Australia in the region. It is an important contribution to foreign policy, trade interests, and positive relations with peoples in the region.
 - RA brings information and understanding of Australia, its people and culture to our neighbours.
 - RA is a way of assisting and engaging with individuals as well as governments. People in other countries depend on RA for reliable, unbiased news and information, untainted by the control of government or private interests.

'The service tried to present a comprehensive and accurate picture of issues and events in the world and the region, providing a valuable service the listeners don't always get from sources in their own countries, and helping them to a more accurate and balanced view. In this way it helped build a sounder basis for the relationship between Australia and its neighbours.'

(Dr Errol Hodge)
- Radio Australia has lost its pre-eminent position as a broadcaster to Indonesia, to the BBC, Voice of America and Voice of Malaysia. At this time other countries are increasing their radio networks into Asia. Events in recent years in Asia and the Pacific have demonstrated the clear need for an ongoing Australian perspective in our region.
- Many Australians who have lived or worked overseas, and in particular those who have depended on RA for information during times of difficulty or uncertainty, express the view that RA provides a vital, and sometimes the only, link with home.

Shortwave Transmission/Cox Peninsula

- Cox Peninsula, near Darwin, broadcast RA's main signal into Asia.
 - Cox Peninsula is Australia's most powerful shortwave transmitter system (300 kilowatt, six transmitters). Cox's powerful transmitters cover Indonesia, India, China, Malaysia, Thailand, The Philippines and Vietnam. The weaker and aging Shepparton and Brandon shortwave transmission facilities provide good coverage in the Pacific region and reach eastern Indonesia and only small parts of China. The ABC had tried bending the signals from the Pacific-oriented Shepparton transmitter westward, but to little effect.
- Without Cox, Australia's shortwave reception in most parts of Asia is poor. In the populated centres of South-East Asia and in the Mekong countries, the signal is too weak to secure listenership - Australia has virtually no shortwave coverage in China, the western two-thirds of Indonesia (being the most populated areas), other countries in Asia, the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East.

- Shortwave is an important medium. Its reach extends to rural areas. Whereas local relays tend to reach only the urban, educated populations, and only two dozen of these radio stations rebroadcast ABC news and current affairs, due to the controlled political environment in which many local stations operate. Internet access is highly successful, but limited to a tiny proportion of RA's audience. (A significant amount of internet access to RA is from North America and within Australia.)

An important advantage of shortwave broadcasting is that no one in the receiving countries can control the content of the program, nor without great difficulty, the listening habits of citizens. Shortwave receivers are inexpensive.

- The excuse presented by the Australian Government - that shortwave broadcasting is past technology - is not shared by the giants of international broadcasting. The BBC, Voice of America and radio France Internationale are spending millions on new shortwave transmitters. The United States has launched a new shortwave service called Radio Free Asia with a budget of \$30 million to broadcast in Mandarin, Tibetan, Burmese, Korean, Vietnamese, Lao and Khmer. Radio China International has imported 10 new shortwave transmitters of 500 kilowatts to strengthen its output in 43 languages. Religious radio has joined the rush to globalisation. In 1996 Adventist World Radio announced the opening of 14 new language services - eight of them Asian. (*Errol Hodge article Age 9.6.00 and info for FABC 28.7.02*)

C. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CUTS TO RA SINCE 1966

Prior to 1996, through shortwave, satellite and internet, RA reached many millions of people in Asia and the Pacific - and beyond. These are our populated neighbours.

In July '96, shortly after its election, the Howard Coalition Government announced cuts to the ABC's triennial funding of 12% (\$66m). After announcing funds would be cut, the Minister for Communications, Senator Alston, announced a Review of the future role and functions of the ABC, to be headed by Bob Mansfield. The Mansfield Report (December 1996; released February 1997) recommended the closure of RA. In the 1997/98 Budget the Government also announced the Cox Peninsula transmitter site would be closed on 30 June '97.

Opposition to plans to close RA was broad and strong. The Government proceeded with its budget cuts to the ABC and the closure of Cox, but by April 1997 it was reported the Government had moved away from its position of total closure, following pressure from the Department of Foreign Affairs and foreign governments.

RA's funds were slashed. It took a disproportionate share of the cuts to the ABC's funding base.

Before the cuts in 1997, **RA's operational budget was \$13.8m pa**, i.e., less than 3 per cent of the ABC's budget. In 1997/98, the RA's **operational budget was cut to \$6.3m**. Its **transmission budget was reduced from \$13.7m to around \$2.5m**. (ABC:RA)

For insignificant savings, the Government effectively ended the transmission of independent news and current affairs and entertainment to established and loyal audiences in East Asia, including thousands of expatriate Australians. It disabled an important means of countering interests contrary to those of Australia. At the time, most media described the decision as ludicrous. It has become even more so. If RA was cut to appease Indonesia, it was wasted. In the next year, Suharto resigned in disgrace. Political and economic upheavals have radically altered the outlook for peace and security in the region since.

In June 2000, the Government sold the Cox Peninsula transmitters to a fundamentalist Christian group, Christian Vision. It left RA to negotiate with CV or with proprietors of an overseas facility for transmission space on a commercial basis. Not only is RA without a voice in Asia, but, at the expense of its own national broadcaster, the Australian Government has handed Cox to an evangelical company to promote its sectarian views to our neighbours - Indonesia and other religiously fraught Asian nations.

Presently (i.e. 2002/03), **RA's overall funding is \$13.6m** - with its **operational budget being \$7.9m**, and its **transmission budget \$2.9m plus a further \$2.8m**, bringing it to \$5.7m (The \$2.8m is the final installment of an \$8.4m one-off three-year grant announced by the government in August 2000 in response to the Asian crisis. It is temporary, and the only restoration of funds the Government has given.) (ABC: RA)

RA is now a considerably smaller operation. Substantial government funding cuts, for both program production and transmission, and the closure of Cox Peninsula have severely downgraded RA's coverage of Asia, particularly in Indochina, Malaysia and Thailand. In addition, transmission costs have increased. With limited funds for the purpose, RA is now forced to purchase shortwave transmission time into Asia from foreign companies.

RA has innovated and achieved much. It now delivers programs in various formats and on a range of platforms: shortwave, satellites, the internet and prerecorded CDs. It has, so-called, 'partner' arrangements with local stations across Asia and the Pacific which rebroadcast some of its material.

However, RA's services and reach remain seriously depleted. RA's independence is compromised as it is forced to negotiate audience access with external bodies, which in many instances are also its competitors - radio stations to rebroadcast ABC material and transmission owners to access transmission facilities. Due to the controlled political environment in which many partner stations operate, they are very selective in the type of material they relay. The number of stations which rebroadcast ABC news and current affairs is small.

RA continues to broadcast into the Pacific from transmitters in Shepparton and Brandon. But **transmission into Asia has been reduced to one fifth**, with RA now being available only on limited frequencies and at certain times of the day. RA's Japanese, Cantonese, Thai and French services have ceased to exist. Other language services broadcast into Asia are significantly reduced - English (from 24 to 7 hours), Indonesian (from 7 to 4.5 hours), Mandarin from 5 to 1.5 hours, Vietnamese (from 3 to 1 hour) and Khmer (2 to 1 hour).

Dr Errol Hodge reports (28.7.02): 'The content of the English-language service has been stripped, and programs prepared specifically for overseas listeners largely replaced by the ABC's domestic programs, some of them almost incomprehensible to foreign listeners. (There are surprising numbers of foreign listeners to the English-language programs in Indonesia and China in particular, where many of the better educated people prefer to listen in English rather than their own national languages.)'

Since Cox Peninsula was closed to RA, changes in governments and events in different parts of the Asia Pacific region have demonstrated the shortsighted nature of the decision to cutback RA's penetration. The coups in Fiji and the Solomon Islands and the unrest and demands for independence in various parts of Indonesia created enormous demands for an independent and comprehensive news service. During these events, the region largely lacked an Australian perspective, as it was left to the BBC and Voice of America which broadcast into our region.

D. 1997 BUDGET CUTS AND CLOSURE OF COX PENINSULA

RA before 1997

- . Prior to 1997, the scope and reach of RA broadcasts gave Australia a strong presence across Asia and the Pacific and a high profile as one of the leading regional broadcasters.
- . Prior to budget cuts in 1997, RA broadcast extensively to Asia and the Pacific in English and seven regional languages with staff of **154** and a **total budget of \$27.5m**. Broadcasts were longer in duration and the shortwave signal in key target areas, particularly in Asia, was stronger and far reaching. Prior to budget cuts in 1997, RA's **operational budget was \$13.8 m.** (RA:ABC)
RA broadcast more hours per person than any other part of the ABC. (CPSU)
- . Prior to 1997, RA's **transmission budget totaled \$13.7 m**. RA fully utilised shortwave transmission facilities at the Cox Peninsula, Shepparton and Brandon sites. Some programs were also relayed by a dozen stations in Asia and the Pacific and over the World Radio Network. (RA:ABC)
- . In the Pacific, RA provided a strong 24 hour service in English, 3 hours in PNG Pidgin and 30 minutes daily in French.
In Asia, RA broadcast 24 hours a day in English, and for lesser periods Indonesian (7 hours daily), Mandarin (5 hours), Vietnamese (3 hours), Khmer (2 hours), Cantonese (1 hour) and Thai (30 minutes). This represented 43 hours of total daily programming in 9 languages. (RA:ABC)
- . Prior to the 1997 budget cuts, RA's estimated **audience reach was between 20-30 million**, with regular weekly listenership at over 5.5 million. RA received more than one hundred thousand letters in 1995/96. (RA:ABC)
Its audience in the Asia Pacific region was second only to Star-TV and equivalent to the BBC and CNN. (CPSU)
Included in RA's audience were leaders and opinion-makers.

1997 Budget Cuts, Closure of Cox Peninsula and their Impact on RA

- . In July 1997, RA was reeling from deep budget cuts. Its **operational funding was reduced by more than 50 per cent to \$6.3m**, its **staff numbers slashed by half** and its **shortwave broadcasting capacity to Asia severely curtailed** by the closure of the Cox Peninsula transmission system. (ABC RA)
- . **Closure of Cox Peninsula** After announcing its closure in the 1997/98 Budget, the Coalition Government closed Cox Peninsula on 30 June 1997 - depriving RA of its most powerful means of reaching its huge audience in China and Indonesia, and other countries in Asia, such as Malaysia and Thailand.

Access was now effectively denied to the millions of RA former listeners in South-East Asia. Their ability to get a first-rate independent news service, as well as to access English language and other courses and information about Australia was made more difficult, if not impossible.

Without guaranteed access to transmission facilities and adequate funds to purchase transmission on a commercial basis, RA has been left in a weak position, unable to compete with more wealthy competitors, such as the BBC.
- . **RA Services after the Cuts and Closure of Cox** After Cox was shut, RA relied on limited satellite relays, weak shortwave signals from Shepparton and Brandon, and internet access. RA pursued a strategy to get its programs rebroadcast on local radio stations throughout countries in Asia and the Pacific, providing pre-recorded programs on CD's to local radio stations.
The number of people with satellite dishes is tiny, and the dishes are illegal in some parts of Asia, including Singapore and Malaysia. Shepparton and Brandon transmission signals are too weak to reach the populated areas of South-East Asia and the Mekong countries. A very small number of Asians have internet capacity.
Rebroadcasts through local Asian stations depend on the grace and favour of the station and host government. Many stations are highly selective in the type of program material they relay. It is no surprise that RA is not available on local radio in most of Asia, from India and Pakistan through western and central China to Thailand and Laos. And those countries which do permit some access, generally exclude RA's news and current affairs programs. Only two dozen stations rebroadcast ABC news and current affairs.

Sale of Cox Peninsula

- . In June 2000, the Federal Government sold the Cox transmitter system, according to media reports, to save \$1.6m a year, even though it had invested \$13.5m in the facility since 1993.
- . The Government sold the Cox Peninsula transmitter system (and leased the site) to Christian Vision, a British based fundamentalist religious organisation. The Government refused to make carriage of RA a requirement of the tender process for Cox. It left RA, with insufficient funds, to negotiate with the new owners of Cox (in effect, a competitor), or with the proprietors of an overseas facility for transmission space on a commercial and a political basis.
At the time, Christian Vision's owner, Bob Edmiston, told the media he had no objection to renting surplus capacity to subsidise his group's running costs, though any deal depended on what and when RA wanted to broadcast.
Restrictions or requirements to meet the objectives of CV or other transmitter owners are an interference in the ABC's independence.
- . In the words of Christian Vision's webpage, Christian Vision broadcasts in order to 'promote christianity' and 'bring about measurable change within that nation'. Cox enables CV to transmit its version of enlightenment to the populous Muslim communities - to areas such as Indonesia where Christianity is a minority religion and religious schisms are a source of unrest and oppression.
- . The Asia-Pacific region needs news and information, not religious propaganda. Not only has the Government wasted a valuable national communications resource, it has replaced an information service with a proselytizing message. CV's messages will not convince our neighbours of the goodwill of the Australian Government at a time when tensions between Muslims and Christians are on the rise.

Temporary Extension of Shortwave Transmission

- . The Australian Government found itself ill-prepared as the Asian economic downturn helped trigger social unrest from Cambodia to Kashmir and then, in Indonesia and East Timor. Endangered Australians in Cambodia had to depend on the BBC World Service to relay Australian Government advice.
After the fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia (May '98) and during the Timor crisis, in 1999 RA tried to negotiate airtime from a transmitter in Singapore, but was rejected by the Singapore Government which did not want to offend Indonesia. In order to communicate with Australians in East Timor, in September 1999, RA temporarily and costly leased time on a shortwave transmitter in Taiwan which covered most of South-East Asia. RA provided two hours of shortwave transmission a day into an area including most of Indonesia West of Bali, Singapore and Malaysia. The lease - which ABC chairman, Donald McDonald explained 'constituted a budgetary drain that the ABC could not sustain indefinitely' - was due to expire at the end of the financial year.
- . Additional funds the ABC had requested in the May 2000 Budget to cover RA's private leases had been rejected.
- . Public opposition in Indonesia to Australian involvement in East Timor was growing. On 8 August 2000 the Coalition Government announced a one-off grant of an additional \$8.4m over three years to strengthen RA transmission and enhance its online services. The government provided no additional funds for production resources, saying these had to come from the ABC's existing budget.
- . RA's option now is only to purchase shortwave transmission time into Asia from foreign companies. (eg. Merlin Communications International, CBS and Christian Vision). RA has used the additional \$2.8m pa to purchase shortwave and satellite transmission into Asia, including airtime from Christian Vision. The funding expires on 30 June 2003.

Loss of Satellite Access

- . At the end of its contractual obligation to provide Australia Television (ATV), which it had purchased from the Government, in March 2001 Channel 7 closed ATV. The ABC had relied on Channel Seven's satellite to help transmit its RA signal into the Pacific and parts of Asia. Countries affected by the loss were: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa and Kiribati; also affected are Phom Penh, Hong Kong and Jakarta. RA was forced to find alternate transmission capacity.

ABC Asia-Pacific TV (APTV)

- In June 2001 the Federal Government announced it had selected the ABC to establish an Australian television service to the Asia Pacific region. ABC independence is undermined by the manner in which ABC Asia-Pacific TV (APTV) is funded, i.e., by the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade and sponsorship, and may taint RA.

RA's relocation onto the APTV satellite is preventing the radio service from providing its own satellite service to India and the South Asian region. The establishment of APTV, at a time when RA is being starved of funds, indicates government support for television at the expense of RA. This is despite radio being cheaper to deliver and accessible to far more of the general population in Asia and the Pacific, and television being a service delivered only in English.

RA's Present Funding and Service

- RA's **present funding is \$13.6m pa**. Its **operational budget is \$7.9m** and **transmission budget \$2.9m, plus a further 2.8m** final installment of one-off funding granted for transmission in August 2000. (RA:ABC)
- RA has a **staff of 76** producing 21.5 hours of programming out of a total daily output of 35 hours in 6 languages. This means there is a high proportion of programs rerun several times a day. (RA:ABC)
- In the Pacific**, RA can be heard from transmitters in Shepparton and Brandon in English 24 hours a day and 3 hours a day in Pidgin.
- In Asia**, RA is now available at certain times of the day on limited frequencies in English (7 hours), Indonesian (4.5 hours), Mandarin (1.5 hours), Vietnamese (1 hour), Khmer (1 hour). RA is purchasing transmission on a commercial basis out of transmitter sites in Singapore, Taiwan, the Northern Mariana Islands and Darwin.

RA can afford to broadcast in shortwave on only one or, at most, two frequencies, which reduces its quality and presence in countries such as Indonesia and China. (Other international broadcasters utilise six frequencies in order to deliver a quality and reliable service.) (RA:ABC)

E. FURTHER INFORMATION

Recognition of RA's importance

- **Broad support** Remarkably diverse voices have spoke out in support of the maintenance of Radio Australia - leading business figures, academics and major political figures in Australia. Support has been expressed by political leaders, organisations and the media in countries of vital importance to Australia's interests. These include - Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and in the South Pacific including, Fiji, Western Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga, Nauru and Solomon Islands. Support has come from Premiers Jeff Kennett and Qld Premier Borbridge, Bruce Ruxton (then head of the RSL), the ACTU, the prime ministers of PNG and Cambodia, and supporters of liberation struggles in Burma, East Timor and Bougainville. Austrians living and working abroad comprise another large group of RA listeners who express support for RA.
- The **Federal Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade** in its 1988 report, *Australia and ASEAN, Managing Change*, said "For all witnesses to the inquiry, the most counterproductive and incomprehensible action in Australia's regional public relations was the effective closure of RA to much of the region," "RA provided a consistent, daily professional projection of Australia and regional affairs; the cheapest and most effective form of public diplomacy Australia has reaching tens of millions of people in the Asia Pacific region and a balance to our more obviously self-interested striving for economic advantage." (*Info from David Lagu article SMH 9.8.00*)
- **1977 Senate Inquiry into the Role and Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television** In its executive summary, the Senate Committee found "it would be foolish in the extreme to cut it [RA's] range of services" and recommended "the Government provide sufficient funds, at least at current levels, to allow Radio Australia to continue to provide its range of English and foreign language services through a variety of media, especially the medium of shortwave radio." The Committee opposed the closure of Cox Peninsula.

RA Audience and Influence - prior to cuts and Cox Closure

(information from RA 1.11.97 and information in quotes from Department of Foreign & Trade submission to the Mansfield Review, except point attributed to Errol Hodge)

- Listeners in the Asia-Pacific mostly rely on shortwave, although RA is also available to most of the region on satellite.
 - In Indonesia "RA still has a strong following from a generally well educated audience and is highly valued. It helps create an image of Australia as the Western country most interested in, and expert about Indonesian affairs." (*DFAT submission to the Mansfield Review*)
 - In the Pacific, RA is one of few reliable sources of news and information. Its news bulletins are rebroadcast on a wide range of local stations and its shortwave service provides a vital link to many isolated communities. DFAT says, "RA's services are a vital part of projecting a positive image to our nearest neighbours demonstrating our continuing high level of interest in their affairs". This is particularly the case in PNG where the national broadcaster is in considerable difficulty. Between 1990 and 1993 reliable surveys show RA's audience in PNG increased from 28% to 39%. Thus DFAT concludes that any reduction in RA's services to the Pacific, "would mean significantly fewer opportunities to disseminate information directly to an audience in our own backyard". Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, Sir Julius Can, describes RA as "the voice of reason" in the region.
 - In China, DFAT says, "RA's language programs are extremely popular and contribute to enhancing our image with one of our most important trading partners". RA's News and English language lessons are particularly successful in China. The Director General of National Radio in China says "RA has long been a respectable and important member of the international radio family. It has a lot of listeners in China".
 - In Indo-China RA has a strong audience in Vietnam and a loyal following in Cambodia, including among Cambodia's rulers. King Norodom Sihanouk, Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Prime Minister Hun Sen have all expressed support for RA. King Sihanouk says he is a regular listener and described RA's news service as, "one of the best in the world and it has been helpful to me keep up to date on events around the world". RA's news and English language lessons are much appreciated by these audiences.

- RA's audience reach in those areas of the Asia-Pacific region which have been surveyed is estimated at 20 million listeners. However, this figure does not include listeners in rural China, Burma and most of India where surveys have not been conducted and where some 750 million adults live. RA receives letters from these areas but there is no way to determine the size of the audience.

In those areas of the Asia-Pacific region where accurate surveys have been done, RA's regular (weekly) audience is: Indonesian language - 2 million; English language - 1 million; Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) - 650,000 in urban areas; Tok Pisin (PNG) - 575,000; Vietnamese - 540,000; French (Pacific) - no accurate surveys done, but the audience reach is estimated at 250,000; and Thai and Khmer - no survey data is available. However, anecdotal information suggests that RA's Khmer service is listened to by some of the most influential people in the country, and that its English language lessons have considerable appeal. The Thai service no longer broadcasts on shortwave but its programs are rebroadcast on Thai national radio and university radio stations.

- It should be noted that RA's shortwave and satellite audience extends well beyond the Asia-Pacific region to the rest of the world. RA's English language Service has also found a new audience in Europe and North America where its programs are now distributed by satellite and rebroadcast on a range of local stations. Listeners in these areas have commented that RA is one of the few reliable sources of news and information about Australia and the Asia Pacific region. The hour of RA rebroadcast on CBC Canada is considered the most popular of all the international programs carried by the network. In Washington, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, says he regularly listens late at night to RA News as the best news service available at that time.
- RA's 24-hour English service is also available on cable in Japan.
- In 1979/80, with 'thought liberation' in China, 183,000 letters and cards poured in from the PRC, many from listeners who said they'd been listening for years in secret. The total number of letters and cards received in that year was 566,000, but the number dropped heavily in subsequent years because Radio Australia lacked the resources to respond by mail. (*Errol Hodge info provided for FABC 28.7.02*)
- In 1995/96, RA received nearly 100,000 letters - including 31,500 letters in Indonesian, 46,500 in Chinese and 11,000 in English. On top of this regular mail, RA received 30,500 letters in response to a competition designed to test audience response. In addition, thousands of letters and emails were received from North America and Europe expressing appreciation of the specialist coverage RA provides of Australia and the Asia-Pacific.
- Kim Elliott, research officer for Voice of America says: "Perhaps a hundred countries have some sort of international radio voice on shortwave. In ten years of audience research I have noted that most of these stations have no measurable audience. They exist as tokens of national sovereignty. RA has been one of less than a dozen international radio services that really has enough of an audience to have a real impact. RA is an important regional voice with large audiences in Indonesia, the Pacific nations and a sizeable audience in China. It remains one of the best ways and one of the few ways to be fully informed about news in Asia, the Pacific and Australia itself. It would be missed."

RA Audience and Influence Lost

RA has lost its position as the pre-eminent foreign broadcaster in Indonesia to the BBC, Voice of America and Voice of Malaysia, with RA's audience halving in the past decade. The BBC is now the best known foreign broadcaster in Indonesia, a position held by RA in the 1980s. Since 1986 RA's Indonesian language audience has more than halved, from a peak of 4 per cent of the population to 1.8 per cent last year, or 2.4 million people. The BBC World Service has aggressively targeted Indonesia in recent years, increasing its audience for Indonesian language services from 3.7 per cent in 1986 to 4.6 per cent last year, or 6.2 million people. Voice of Malaysia also has a stronger Indonesian presence now than RA, with almost 3.4 m regular listeners in Indonesia. (*information from audience research of BBC World Service, reported in Age 2.5.00*)

RA's Relationship with other Services

- Since 1997, RA has developed an extensive network of 135 partner stations across Asia and the Pacific and is also heard via the World Radio Network on an additional 110 stations and cable outlets in Europe and North America.
RA's website publishes material daily in 6 languages and registered 12 million page visits in 2000. (RA:ABC Aug 2002)
- RA has developed close links with several universities. RA has been involved in the production of audio and on-line education series with Monash, Victoria and Sydney Universities. (RA:ABC Aug 1998)
- RA programs are used as an educational Asia-Pacific and Asian language resource by Victorian schools. (RA:ABC Aug 1998)

RA's Independence from Government

Prime Minister Menzies launched RA as "Australia Calling" in 1939, and it was an instrument of propaganda during the Second World War and to some extent the Cold War. When he was Foreign Minister, Hasluck became increasingly impatient with its reluctance to follow his department's "guidance", and planned to have it moved from Melbourne to Canberra and put under DFA control. But his plan was frustrated by his departmental secretary, James Plimsoll, who thought it would risk turning RA into a propaganda medium like Tass or Radio Moscow with the loss of its credibility. (Errol Hodge info for FABC 28.7.02)

Errol Hodge in *Radio Wars: truth, propaganda and the struggle for Radio Australia* documents 60 years of continuing struggle by ABC Boards to resist the control of successive departments of External and (later) Foreign Affairs. One reason was the compromising shadow of propaganda that hung over the BBC and Voice of America. Another was that the British and American services set out to address opinion leaders and power elites in foreign countries. RA adopted a much broader and more democratic approach to its audience, especially in Asia and the Pacific.

Reversal of Decision to Close RA

In backing away from the total closure of RA in 1997, the Government determined which services would be cut. It proceeded with the proposed ABC budget cuts and closure of Cox Peninsula, and in the May 1997 Budget announcement specified RA services and funds to be allocated.

One-off Funds to Strengthen Transmission

- The three-year, one-off additional \$8.4m funding announced on 8.8.00 - to strengthen RA transmission and enhance its online services - was jointly announced by Foreign Affairs Minister Downer and Communications Minister Alston. The Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade informed FABC (verbally) these funds are not from any department budget, but are overseen by DFAT.
- The crisis in Indonesia was a key factor in the Government's move to reverse one of its biggest foreign policy blunders, and partially restore RA's regional reach. The danger to Australia's standing in Indonesia was evident. It appears the Government had come to recognise the importance of RA and its independent news service in countering the mobilisation of public opinion to blame Australia for Jakarta's problems in East Timor. The Government stated "Recent events have highlighted the value of Australia's international broadcasting activities in conveying accurate news and information to the region, as well as providing an Australian perspective." *Senator Alston's office August 2000.*
- The additional funds enabled RA to lease some time from Christian Vision on Cox. The funds enabled RA to extend its broadcasts to Indonesia to four and a half hours a day on several frequencies, and to start broadcasting again to Asia in English seven hours a day.

RA Transmission Facilities

The ABC does not own the transmitting facilities it uses to broadcast its programs, including those of RA. Under arrangements announced by the Coalition Government - at the time the Parliament passed its December 1998 legislation to sell the National Transmission Agency (NTA) - ABC access to transmission facilities is protected and funded by the federal government for a specified period of time. In March 1999 the Government sold the NTA to NTL (a UK based telecommunications and media company). This did not include the Cox Peninsula site. Earlier this year NTL sold the transmitters to Broadcast Australia (Macquarie Bank).

Cox Peninsula

- Early History:** In '96 the Labor Government closed down transmitters in Carnarvon (WA) to provide funds for Australia Television (the ABC's Asia-Pacific television service the Coalition Government sold

off cheaply to Channel 7 in 1997, and which Channel 7 later closed). The Government transferred the largest of the three transmitters at Carnarvon, which is the most powerful shortwave transmitter in Australia. It was refurbished, taken to Cox Peninsula (near Darwin) and installed for a cost of approximately \$1.7 million. It was commissioned about the time the Coalition Government shut it down on June 30 1997, saying it was too expensive to operate. In a letter to FABC 9.9.99, the Dept of Communications claimed closure of Cox resulted in 'full year savings of around \$4.1m per annum'.

- **Cox Peninsula Transmitter System – sale/lease** When the Federal Government sold the Cox Peninsula transmitters to Christian Vision in June 2000, it leased the site to CV (believed to be for ten years). An Aboriginal land rights claim prevented the site's sale. The claim has been successful but this does not affect the contract.

- **Christian Vision** The chair and another owner of CV - evangelical Christians who say they Christian Vision to preach the gospel to most of the underdeveloped world - have 100 per cent ownership of Christian Vision. CV's website describes the group as a 'charitable company'.

According to *The Australian's* religious affairs editor, James Murray, this company 'is so convinced of its righteousness that it consigns those who do not accept Jesus Christ to what it calls "everlasting conscious punishment", and says their "names are not written in the Book of Life".' (*Australian* 6.6.02)

Christian Vision is a charitable trust owned by Bob Edmiston who has a car importing business, estimated at the time he purchased Cox to be worth \$770m.

Edmiston would not confirm what he paid for the Cox transmitters, but other sources claimed the final sale price was no more than \$2million, even though new equipment bought in the 1990s cost at least \$12m.

Mr Edmiston says it would cost at least \$25m to build such a transmitter from scratch.

How did he buy Asia's most powerful shortwave radio transmitter for a tenth of its estimated value beating the world's most aggressive broadcasters, including the BBC?

Christian Voice (now Voice International) broadcasts across Africa and Latin America. Cox gives it a potential new audience of 2.5 billion from India to China and across to Indonesia. (*Michelle Gilchrist, Australian* 17.7.00)

Mansfield Review re RA (December 1996; report released February 1997)

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade urged Mansfield to consider 'the significant role the ABC's international service play in advancing Australia's trade and diplomatic objectives'. Mansfield reported he had 'some difficulty in identifying the extent to which the ABC plays such a role and, if it does, the extent to which it is effective in doing so'. Mansfield took the view that 'maintenance of an overseas broadcasting service will be at the cost of domestic programming.

The Mansfield Report recommended closure of RA and the removal of overseas services as a priority in the ABC's Charter. Mansfield recommended that if the Government wanted an overseas broadcasting service, then it should be funded 'in the context of the public diplomacy effort' (i.e. by the Department of Foreign Affairs).

Sources referred to in this brief:

- ABC: Radio Australia
- Dr Errol Hodge, editor-in-chief of Radio Australia 1985-1992; author of *Radio Wars: truth, propaganda and the struggle for Radio Australia* which covers the history of RA until 1995 (Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- Community & Public Sector Union (CPSU)
- Department of Foreign & Trade (DFAT)



Friends of the ABC

A healthy *independent* and *comprehensive* national public broadcaster is critical to Australian democracy and culture. The ABC's independence - from political and commercial influence - enables it to report without fear or favour. The ABC is responsible to promote Australian culture and, as a comprehensive broadcaster, to cater for a diversity of interests in the community.

As one of the most important producers and disseminators of culture and information in Australia, the ABC is a body with which the entire community is vitally concerned. Friends of the ABC is the major body representing the public's interest in its national public broadcaster.

Friends of the ABC's objectives:

To support the maintenance and advancement of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

- to fulfil to a high standard its role as an independent and comprehensive national public broadcaster
- to be adequately funded by government to fulfil its role;
- to remain independent of government influence, commercial sponsorship and advertising; and
- to promote Australian culture in all its diversity.

There are Friends of the ABC organisations in each Australian state and territory which often work together in a national campaign. In turn, some FABCs have local groups that operate in regional and some metropolitan areas.

Increased concern about the ABC's future as an independent and comprehensive broadcaster has resulted in Friends of the ABC (FABC) becoming a large organization. Membership in each state is growing.

Friends of the ABC in each state and territory are independent, non-profit community organisations. They have a diverse range of members, and earn their income from membership subscriptions, public donations and fundraising activities. They receive no government funding.

Friends of the ABC engages in a range of activities at national, state and local levels. These include: informing the public, communicating with Members of Parliament and media, presenting submissions to government reviews and inquiries, addressing public meetings, conducting rallies and publishing newsletters.

FABC is politically unaligned. It works for the best interests of independent and comprehensive national public broadcasting, challenging governments of any political persuasion that attempt to dismantle or interfere in the ABC's independence.

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