

## **Submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific**

I served as a Patrol Officer in then the then Territory of Papua and New Guinea between 1969 and 1974. During that time I undertook extensive patrolling in some of the most remote parts of the country and lived in a number of very isolated places for extended periods including Baimuru and Kikori in the Gulf Province, Koroba and Kagua in Hela Province and Popondetta and Kokoda in Oro Province.

In those days, which long predated TV, mobile phones and the internet, communication with the outside world was severely restricted. As a consequence, there was an almost total reliance upon radio to maintain contact with what was happening in the wider world.

One of my first purchases in PNG was a short wave transistor radio. This radio was a source of both information and entertainment for me. In those days it was possible to tune into what were the “big 3” short wave radio stations, being the Voice of America, the BBC World Service and, of course, Radio Australia. The latter was the station to which I tuned the radio most of the time.

Radios were then very scarce outside of the main centres or a government Patrol Post. The administration of the time was therefore encouraging the indigenous people to purchase them and the local ABC radio stations were broadcasting programs in the two main common languages of Motu (Papua) and Pidgin (New Guinea), as well as in English.

It would be fair to say that the acquisition of a radio in a remote village was a very big deal for the people living there. They were avid listeners and would gather round the radio to hear the news as well as enjoy music programs, especially those that included local musicians who were then beginning to write and perform their own distinctive style of music.

Radio Australia was also a very popular choice for listening. The villagers who could speak English would listen to news and current affairs programs and then give their fellow villagers a digested version in their own language. For most people living in remote and rural PNG the short wave radio was literally the only way in which they could gain contact with the outside world.

Now, of course, things have greatly changed in PNG. The use of mobile phones is widespread, the internet is available in the major towns and both radio and TV stations operate across the country. Papua New Guineans are clearly now more connected with the outside world and each other than ever before.

On the face of it, one therefore could easily imagine that short wave radio is now an old and irrelevant technology. This would be an understandable but entirely erroneous assumption.

While the major centres certainly have access to the modern communication technologies, this is not the case for much of remote and rural PNG.

It is hard for a person not familiar with PNG to understand just how incredibly difficult it is to move around the country. Much of the terrain is extremely mountainous, while other parts like the Gulf of Papua or the Sepik delta are vast swamp lands through which flow innumerable rivers and creeks. The islands to the east and north of the mainland are, of course, separated by sometimes large distances. In short, those people living in rural and remote PNG remain very isolated and mostly reliant upon sometimes erratic air and sea transport to maintain physical contact with the wider world.

Such isolation includes the inability to access the more modern forms of communications which we are now used to in Australia. The notion that a mobile phone can serve as the sort of all purpose communication device that Australians take for granted is meaningless in places like Baimuru or Kokoda or Telefomin. In such circumstances, radio remains a vital means (and, very often, still the only means) by which to maintain contact with the wider world.

Of late, Australia has somewhat belatedly awoken to the activities of the Peoples Republic of China in the Pacific and Oceania. China is in the process of establishing itself as a major influence in this region and is willing to deploy large amounts of money to do so. Thus far at least, it appears to be having considerable success. Sadly, the leaders of PNG and other Pacific nations are deeply susceptible to the prospect of easy access to large amounts of money and have little apparent regard to the potential transaction costs involved.

While China is perfectly entitled to pursue its national interests in this way it remains, at bottom, an authoritarian regime. History strongly suggests that such regimes are never really a benign force in human affairs. For this reason alone, Australia can and should be deploying its resources to maintain and, hopefully, extend its influence in the region.

Fortunately, despite the apparent largesse of China, there is good evidence that many people in PNG remain cautious if not suspicious about their new best friend. They especially dislike the way in which Chinese business interests and workers are increasingly taking up residence in their country and assuming effective control of segments of the local economy. There is, in short, extensive unease about the PNG government's decision to engage more closely with China through the Belt and Road initiative.

Because Australia was a largely benign colonial power in PNG and because there remain extensive business and personal links between the two countries, there is a large reservoir of goodwill in PNG directed towards Australia. This is especially true in the remote areas, where successive PNG governments have presided over a slow decline in both the level and quality of public health, education and other services.

Those who can remember, still speak kindly of the Australian administration which, whatever its faults, strove to provide these services in even the most remote parts of the country.

Given this general context, the decision in 2017 to cease short wave radio services into PNG and the wider Pacific and Oceania was a disastrous error in judgement. At one stroke, Australia lost its ability to communicate with and influence the thinking of a very large segment of the population in that region and simultaneously denied those people access to a well established and valued source of information and entertainment. The people who made this decision apparently did so without much regard to its likely impact on listeners, both short and long term. Presumably, the budget impact upon the ABC was the most important consideration.

This enquiry presents an opportunity for key decision makers to reconsider the various factors involved in this decision. It is an opportunity to give much greater weight to the geo-political, strategic and human factors involved than to the budgetary issues.

In short, it provides an opportunity to reverse an unwise and short sighted decision that has harmed Australia's reputation in PNG and deprived it of a way to maintain contact with people whose goodwill and support is an important national asset. Thus, for entirely selfish reasons alone it makes sense to resume short wave broadcasting across PNG and the wider Pacific. The fact that it will bring information and entertainment to people who are often starved of both is simply an added, altruistic benefit.

It is not too fanciful to suppose that, one day, Australia will again have very good reason to rely upon the goodwill and support of our nearest northern neighbor. The re-establishment of short wave radio services is an easy, sustainable and relatively inexpensive way to do this and I urge the enquiry to recommend this course of action to the government and the ABC.

Yours sincerely,



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