

The Connors Report: "The Right of the Australian Citizen as Taxpayer and Audience"

Seven years have passed since the passage of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) provisions of the Broadcasting and Television Act 1942. Now the Connors Report, released on 25 March 1985 and named after Xavier Connor, Chairman of the Committee of Review of the SBS, provides the most complete analysis to date of the SBS and the performance of its television and radio services. The Report fills a mammoth three volumes together with an 85-page Synopsis and Summary of Recommendations.

The Committee's eight terms of reference permitted a thorough review of the SBS's administration and its services. Broadly speaking, the terms of reference asked whether maintaining the SBS is justified given the existence of other services, particularly those of the ABC and public broadcasters. The Committee was also asked to review the principles and structures necessary to ensure firstly, greater community participation and consultation with the SBS and secondly, provision of English language learning.

The Committee makes a considerable number of recommendations which, if the Government adopts them, will have bearing on virtually every aspect and department of the SBS's operations in the future. The SBS is currently involved in assessment of the Report's impact on such various areas as community consultation and participation, program policy and scheduling, promotion and publicity of programs, staffing and industrial relations, technical issues and funding. This paper is more concerned with the way in which the Report is likely to affect broadcast planning.

The Committee's Report has a high level of sympathy with the concept of multiculturalism (see Chapter 3: "Multiculturalism and Broadcasting"). The Report notes the origins of the SBS in ethnic radio operated by ethnic communities on an entirely voluntary basis. Comparisons are made with services in Canada (for Eskimos and Canadian Indians), the United Kingdom (for West Indians and Asians), and the Netherlands and West Germany (for "guest workers"). Many countries have ethnic broadcasting, such as is practised on 2EA and 3EA which cater sequentially to different ethnic groups.

But multicultural broadcasting, as on 0/28, is unique because it takes a mix of programs and schedules them for a broader, varied audience (para. 3.59). With respect to other multicultural and broadcasting terms the glossary in Part One of the Report is particularly useful.

A New Statutory Authority

Currently the SBS under Section 79D of the Broadcasting and Television Act 1942 is empowered to "provide multilingual broadcasting services" and to "provide broadcasting and television services for such special purposes as are prescribed". The Committee recommends the establishment of a new organisation to replace the SBS. This organisation should be set up as a statutory authority to be called the "Multicultural Broadcasting Corporation" (MBC). The legislation governing the new body should be similar to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983. With respect to funding, the Committee rules out advertising or sponsorship on the MBC's radio and television stations. In addition to the name change, the Committee has made specific recommendations for the establishment of community consultation mechanisms. Additionally a number of recommendations deal with internal matters such as management and the recruitment, staffing and training of personnel.

The SBS-ABC Relationship

Appearing three years after the publication of the Dix Report and a year after the establishment of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Connors Report takes up the issue of whether there is a case for an amalgamation of Australia's two major public sector broadcasters. The initial observation of the Committee is that efforts made by both the ABC and the SBS to meet the Dix recommendation of "maximum possible immediate collaboration" have been minimal. The managements of both bodies approach the question of amalgamation with limited interest.

It is all too evident to the Committee that a myriad of historical, emotional, attitudinal and structural factors keep the two bodies frozen in separate camps. The majority of submissions opposed any amalgamation of the ABC and the SBS. Of 670 submissions which

mentioned the issue, over 69 per cent opposed amalgamation, with around 18 per cent in favour and less than 13 per cent taking a neutral or undecided view (para. 5.32). Opposition to amalgamation was largely based on negative factors such as claims that the ABC itself had poor management and lacked sensitivity to multiculturalism. Those favouring amalgamation based their view on the economic argument and a fear that ethnic/multicultural broadcasting would remain apart from the mainstream as long as the SBS continued to exist. But even with respect to the economic perspective on amalgamation it remains unclear from the Report whether significant savings would be made from the two budgets which in 1984-85 amounted to \$340 million to the ABC and \$39 million to the SBS.

In its conclusion, the Committee regards amalgamation as an ideal towards which both organisations should conscientiously work. To ensure that result, it goes two steps beyond the Dix Report by recommending that the ABC and the SBS should have a statutory obligation to report every six months to the Minister for Communications on the steps they have taken towards cooperation and coordination of resources and facilities. On this subject it also recommends cross-promotion of programs by ABC TV and multicultural television and a close coordination of their future program policies and schedules as well as a general standardisation of their operations. It also recommends that the Government should conduct a further inquiry in 1990 into both the ABC and the SBS/MBC to consider the question of their integration.

In sum, such recommendations will work to keep the amalgamation option open for the joint review in 1990. Naturally the performance of any new MBC and revamped ABC will also have bearing upon that decision.

The SBS and Public Broadcasters

The Committee recognised that with the limited ethnic radio service that currently exists there has grown a considerable demand for the expansion of ethnic radio services. The question before the Committee was whether to adopt the recommendations of the SBS or those of public broadcasters.

The Report observes that currently 16 public stations broadcasting ethnic programs are receiving government subsidies. Two of these, SEBI in Adelaide

and 4EB in Brisbane, are fully ethnic public stations. The subsidies amount to \$655,000 and are distributed through the SBS. In contrast the cost of the SBS's 2EA and 3EA stations amounts to many millions. In its own words, the Committee "came down firmly in favour of public broadcasters as the major means of providing ethnic radio program services in parts of Australia not covered by the EA stations" (para. 2.23).

Having rejected the concept of a national ethnic radio network, the Committee goes on to recommend the establishment of a "National Program Packing Unit" to produce program material - particularly news, current affairs, features and information - for distribution to all public broadcasters, the ABC and commercial stations wanting to use them. It also recommends an increase in the funding for ethnic public broadcasting to \$1 million for 1985-86, but advises that low coverage community stations in Sydney and Melbourne should not be funded. The Government should call for applications for ethnic public broadcasting station licences in Melbourne as soon as possible and in Sydney and Perth if demand is established.

Australian Content

Put bluntly, it appears that the Committee does not regard SBS television (in contrast to the SBS's radio stations) as having to date obtained sufficiently high ratings. The Committee goes to some length to qualify its views by stating that factors "not measurable with statistics" do justify the SBS's television services. Chief among these factors is the "respect" which those individuals and organisations making submissions said had been engendered for their heritage. Accordingly the Committee recommends that resources be made available to allow the SBS to increase the public's awareness of its services and to expand transmission time of multicultural television.

In this writer's view the Committee's observations regarding SBS television's ratings significantly strengthen the local production arguments of the Australian Film Commission with the ABC and the SBS (see AFC Annual Report 1984: pp. 12-14). The Committee observes that:

The 0/28 news normally rates between 3 and 4. The best rating (Cont'd NEXT PAGE)

ever achieved by 0/28 is 7: for episodes of "Women of the Sun", and for an Australian classic movie - both programs in English and of Australian origin." (para. 4.50).

In recent years high rating Australian television programs including "Women of the Sun", "Waterfront" and "The Cowra Breakout" have begun to feature subtitles, most commonly because they have been co-financed with overseas partners. With changes to Section 10BA of the Income Tax Assessment Act on the horizon and with the likely increase in co-productions and co-financing arrangements, multicultural television may in future be reviewed in very different market circumstances.

The Committee is more concerned with current perceived audience needs and recommends that multicultural television aim for a level of Australian content of 50 per cent by 1988. This will increase substantially its production and purchase of drama in English or primarily in English. The Committee becomes very specific when it also provides that approximately 50 per cent of programs in prime viewing time (6.00 p.m. to 10 p.m.) should be in English and of a multicultural nature. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the SBS actively pursue all avenues for co-productions and joint ventures both within Australia and with broadcasters and producers overseas. But to implement these recommendations it's clear that the local production budget for 0/28 would definitely have to increase beyond the current \$6 million allocation.

Towards 1990

The Connors Report is a well argued and extensively researched document. It would appear that the Committee was successful in its efforts to obtain public comment both during its hearings and from submissions made to it from a broad spectrum of sources.

Within three years multicultural television will have been extended to all capital cities, Wollongong and Newcastle and potentially to provincial centres through AUSSAT. Australia will then have a second, government funded, national television network. It will be interesting to observe the performance of the SBS in these new fields, and its relationship with the ABC and public broadcasters.

Noric Dilanchian

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Communications Update - Newsletter of the Media and Communications Council, GPO Box 4264 Sydney 2001. 10 issues per year are to be published. The 4 page issue number 1 of March 1985 has been released.

Freedom of Information - Peter J. Byrne. This recently published book is an analysis of the Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act and the Victorian Freedom of Information Act. As well as providing an explanation of the provisions of the Acts, it includes a practical guide to using them. (The Law Book Company Limited)

After AUSSAT..? Edited by Keith Smith and Liz Fell. Papers of the AUSSAT conference held in 1984. (Australian Film and Television School).

Asian Pacific Review of Computers Technology and the Law. General Editor - John Connors. (Longman Professional Publishing).

Satellite and Cable Television: International Protection - Said Mosteshar and Stephen B. Bate An Oyez Longman Intelligence Report. (Longman Professional Publishing).

Annual Report 1983-84 - Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. 277p. (AGPS).

Manual - Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. 172p + Appendices (AGPS).

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