

On a rainy Autumn morning in April, 1997, the ABC Board came to Melbourne, the home of *Radio Australia*, to decide its future.

As Board directors entered the Southbank building, the usual life and noise of the place seemed to have vanished; the building was suspended in a hush.

In the atrium, Radio Australia's staff were gathered, symbolically silent, wearing either funereal black or national dress.

Suddenly a shower of petals - the Cambodian symbol of mourning - fell upon us from a balcony above.

As we headed to the lifts and from them to the fifth floor meeting room, we waded slowly through a sea of letters from Radio Australia listeners - from Thailand, China, Cambodia, all over Asia and the Pacific - anxious pleas in favour of a service they loved and feared might be lost.

Many of those gathered at Southbank that morning believed that on this, the last day of April, the last days of *Radio Australia* were being played out.

That the Board would finally decide to accept the vastly changed circumstances for ABC international broadcasting, and concede to the Mansfield review recommendation of January that year.

Recommendation 18 of the Mansfield report *The challenge of a better ABC* said that the requirement for the ABC to broadcast programs to audiences outside Australia should cease; and that the ABC should be permitted to apply net savings from the closure of Radio Australia to the achievement of its savings target.

Mansfield also recommended that if an appropriate commercial arrangement for the ABC's international television service, *Australia Television*, had not been entered into before June 1997, it too should be closed down.

*Australia Television* had been languishing for some years, afflicted by a kind of financial anaemia, difficulties brought about by shifts in Government attitudes and expectations about its funding.

Unable to sustain itself via commercial sponsorship, and unable to gain sufficient funding from the Keating government, *Australia Television's* end had effectively been determined once the ABC Board had decided, in 1995, that no further ABC base funding would be diverted to it.

By the time of the Board meeting two years later in Melbourne, *Australia Television* was about to be sold, ultimately to the Seven Network - and would no longer be part of the ABC.

Everything conspired in 1997 to suggest that for the ABC, international broadcasting had suddenly arrived on the wrong side of history. It was over.

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How therefore, you might ask, did we get from there to here, with the vibrant, viable manifestation of ABC international broadcasting we have today with *Radio Australia* and *Australia Network*, the television service?

*Radio Australia* today reaches one of the broadest audiences in all of Asia and the Pacific – from the poorest rural villager to more affluent and educated residents of the cities.

It goes out in seven languages: Indonesian, Mandarin Chinese, Tok Pisin, Khmer, Vietnamese, French and of course, English.

It is listened to by millions in Cambodia, Thailand, China, Indonesia, and all over the Pacific - including recent trouble spots like the Solomons, Tonga and East Timor. One in three Papua New Guineans listen each week.

*Australia Network* television speaks directly to business and civic leaders from the Cook Islands to Mongolia, from India to Papua New Guinea; it is the fastest growing service in the region.

How did such a renaissance take place?

Since the trials of the past have shaped the present, we might recall the journey taken over the past decade, before the context is lost forever.

There are lessons both for the ABC in this resurgence of our international services – and for the Australian people and our future governments as well.

Our need for these services has grown over the decade, in parallel with Australia's bipartisan foreign policy objective of growing engagement with regional neighbours.

However, back to 1997.

Bob Mansfield had been presented with a bottom line, and asked to recommend how the ABC might meet it. Within eighteen weeks, he had done just that.

He made many recommendations, but that which is most relevant to us in today's context was that the ABC should leave international broadcasting behind.

Given the ABC's new financial position, Bob Mansfield reasoned that if international broadcasting were sacrificed, domestic broadcasting might be saved. An unattractive, defeatist proposition.

At this time however, ABC Management were receptive to the idea of *Radio Australia's* closure.

Perhaps this is why the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Report *The Role and Future of Radio Australia and Australia Television*, begun after publication of the Mansfield review, was able to note "...a significant amount of evidence which demonstrated the attitude of ABC management towards RA has been one of historical neglect and even, at times - perhaps - one of disdain."

Or how Peter Barnett, RA's Director from 1980 to 1989, was able to tell the Committee "the relationship between RA and the ABC has not always been positive and it has not always been effective...RA was very often out of sight, out of mind; something of a mystery, something of a problem. Senior management ...did not always appreciate the culture, the capacity and the potential of RA".

This is the context in which Mansfield's suggestions were heard within the ABC. He added that \$20 million spent on *Radio Australia* could, further down the track, mean \$20 million less for ABC activity in regional Australia. "Cutting reporters" he explained "in Townsville, Cairns, Rockhampton, Alice Springs and Central Australia".

The ABC's Charter, set out in Section 6 of the ABC Act of 1983 is very specific about international broadcasting, requiring the Corporation

*"...to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs and television programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:*

*encourage awareness of Australia and the international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs;*  
*and enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs."*

Any recommendation, therefore, to abandon international broadcasting would require changes to the ABC Act; yet no one had suggested changing the Act.

The ABC's obligations were to stay in place. What *had* changed was that the funds sufficient to meet that obligation, at its current levels, were no longer going to be provided by Government.

The ABC's Triennial Funding submission 1997-2000 had sought funds sufficient to maintain the existing range of *Radio Australia* language services.

The Government indicated however that it would provide funding sufficient only for satellite and short-wave services in two languages - English and Tok Pisin (Pidgin).

On that April day, the Board did the unexpected and responded to this new budget by committing the ABC to international broadcasting services *above and beyond* the minimal standard the designated Government funding would permit.

While withdrawing from French, Thai and Cantonese language programs, the Board committed to continue *Radio Australia's* Bahasa Indonesian, Mandarin, Khmer and Vietnamese programming in reduced form.

As well, the funds needed for this *international* activity would be drawn directly from the ABC's *domestic* budget - in addition to the funded English and Tok Pisin services.

It was Mansfield in reverse, and the decision was informed by a belief that, from a base of this size and range, the rebuilding of *Radio Australia* could still be contemplated. Anything less would lead inexorably to silence.

Yet the difficulties with funding were by no means the greatest test for *Radio Australia* in 1997.

Just two months later, on the 30<sup>th</sup> June, the Cox Peninsula transmitter near Darwin, through which short-wave coverage to Indochina, Malaysia and Thailand had been provided, was closed down, to be sold as part of the asset realisation program.

There was a lot of talk at the time about the impending redundancy of short-wave radio, by explicit contrast with the excitement and promise of the digital age.

Any comfort that might be found in such a promise was, however, qualified by the fact that many in *Radio Australia's* audience were rural dwellers excluded from that promise. It was a dream that only money could buy.

It's not always the strong who survive, but those who are capable of change, and *Radio Australia* would clearly have to prove itself capable of change. And it did.

It countered these three great dislocations of 1997 – the losses of budget, language services, and transmission arrangements – with an enterprising spirit. Misfortune drove it not to resignation or despair, but towards new solutions.

Jean-Gabriel Manguy, who took over as director of the service in that tumultuous year, told me that *RA* came through that period according to an old maxim: *if you're going through hell, keep going*.

Fortunately, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer shared our faith in *Radio Australia* and would be an ally in the Board's insistent and determined campaign to secure its future. I pay tribute to his support at that time and later, when in August 2000 the Government allocated an extra \$2.8m. to *Radio Australia* to increase transmission.

Having lost access to its valuable short-wave Asian transmitter, *Radio Australia* set a new course. It actively and energetically sought out new technologies (additional to short-wave) to enable it to reach new audiences. It fostered close relationships with a wide network of partners, more than 300, across Asia and the Pacific.

It had to approach distribution of its programs less as a single stream than a mosaic - a mix of shortwave, AM and FM services, satellite, digital radio, online transmissions and rebroadcasts to reach local audiences, millions across the Asia-Pacific region.

Because we have had decades of public investment in transmission infrastructure in Australia we can take for granted the ease and simplicity with which our media services come to us.

Yet in many countries throughout the Asia Pacific, technical arrangements of transmission and distribution are, by contrast, complex and hugely challenging.

As *ABC Asia Pacific* television service would later discover, this challenge applies equally to television.

Because we have so many choices of media in Australia, we also take for granted the range of voices we are able to listen to. Being so privileged, it is difficult for us to imagine how necessary a service like *Radio Australia* might be.

In some parts of the region an alternative source of information like *Radio Australia*, a trusted voice with an independent perspective, is vital. Quite simply, it delivers services not otherwise available.

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RA's story is that of a struggle to survive. The story of the international television service, *ABC AsiaPacific*, is that of a struggle to be born.

Again, tribute must be paid to the vision of Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his department. DFAT broke with the past, backing their belief in the value of such a service by, for the first time, *fully funding it*.

On the basis of this new financial arrangement and the ABC's own expertise and commitment, a confident 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian international television service was created.

The failure of *Australia Television* – firstly with the ABC and later through Channel Seven who, disillusioned by its commercial performance shut the service down overnight – had created an ambivalent legacy for any future Australian international television service.

That legacy included the lingering impression of an ABC service that favoured expats over locals.

And the Seven service that followed, while dedicated to being cheap but cheerful, proved to be not so cheerful for its accountants.

However, scepticism about Australian international television efforts was but one of many hurdles the founders of *ABC Asia Pacific* had to overcome in preparation for its launch on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2001 – New Year's eve.

The Department of Foreign Affairs contract had been won in August 2001. The service was set to launch five months later.

Consider for a minute how steep the learning curve was for our new international television management team.

ABC Television is deeply immersed in Australian life; its understanding of the legislative and financial nuances of the local media landscape has been acquired over many years.

For an international service throughout Asia you also have to acquire that kind of specialist legal and financial knowledge – for more than forty territories. And *ABC AsiaPacific* had months, not years, in which to learn this.

Add that to the standard repertoire of challenges in doing business internationally - differences of language, culture and custom – and we might begin to appreciate the scale of achievement of John Doherty, who led the first *ABC AsiaPacific* team, taking it from scratch in August to launch in December.

*ABC Asia Pacific* television began as a four hour loop of repeated programs.

Five years later, *Australia Network* television – launched in August this year – operates 24 hours 7 days a week over three different time zones of Pacific, Asia, and Indian subcontinent. This is particularly helpful if you don't want your audiences watching *Play School* at 9pm.

*Australia Network* television is also designed to be relevant to 41 distinctive markets. Its distribution and rebroadcast arrangements range from tin shed operators guarding their cable with guns to industry giants – a veritable wilderness of over 300 different businesses.

It makes its way to 10.2 million homes, reaching its audiences via rebroadcasts through local pay tv providers, over direct to home satellite dishes, and through cables to hotels and apartment buildings.

Apart from the regard for Australia as a clever, confident country that exists throughout Asia, *Australia Network* television enjoys a great advantage.

Its own correspondents in Delhi, Beijing, Jakarta and the Pacific provide an Australian perspective that is regarded as local to, part of and more empathetic with the region it serves.

Long established services such as CNN and BBC World can neither emulate this geographical advantage nor hope to acquire the regional consciousness that is natural to it.

Nor do they, as 24 hour news services, attempt to offer the more broadly engaging general television service that *Australia Network* does – with its drama & documentary, education, children's programming *and* news programming.

*Australia Network* also meets a growing demand among younger audiences for English language skills, in partnership with Australian tertiary institutions for the *Study English* program.

Interest in this programming is simply phenomenal. It has been taken up in such a big way in Vietnam that *Australia Network* was asked to make its program available for screening on Vietnam's domestic networks, a request they were pleased to fulfil.

The creation of an ABC international broadcasting division in 2003, bringing together under one roof the management teams of *ABC AsiaPacific* television and *Radio Australia* created, as expected, useful synergies between the two international operators, including cross-promotion.

Any international ABC enterprise benefits from the combined expertise of our network of foreign correspondents. No other Australian media enterprise comes close to it.

But there are other benefits as well, such as *Radio Australia* being able to piggyback off some of the satellite arrangements of firstly *ABC AsiaPacific* and later, *Australia Network* television services.

As a public enterprise *Radio Australia* proved itself to be resolutely imaginative and enterprising. Where others saw obstacles, *Radio Australia* saw opportunities.

And I sometimes reflect upon the irony that it was a public enterprise, *ABC AsiaPacific* television which, in the space of five, feverishly energetic years, utterly transformed the market for Australian international television.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australian international television had become an unsellable proposition, a proven recipe for red ink.

By the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup>, due to the groundbreaking success of *ABC AsiaPacific* in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs, it had become an immensely attractive commercial proposition.

Such a transformation might well have ultimately been to the ABC's disadvantage.

For by the time *ABC AsiaPacific*'s first five year contract was up, a tender process had begun for a 2006-2011 Australian international television service. It is perhaps a fitting tribute to *ABC AsiaPacific*'s success that bidding for the new service was marked by acute and intense competition from commercial players.

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I think it was Chesterton who said that "*The way to love anything is to realise that it might be lost*". We came close to getting that kind of reminder about *Radio Australia* back in 1997. And again later, the ABC might well have lost a position in international television it had worked so hard to create.

Perhaps that is why we can all take some pride in the ABC's constancy in international broadcasting since 1997. Why its success, because it has so often been achieved against such odds, might be more treasured.

It is quite apparent now that over the past decade some large questions about Australia's international broadcasting have been asked and resolved, and resolved I hope, for some time.