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The Early Days of Community Broadcasting

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**THE EARLY DAYS OF COMMUNITY
BROADCASTING: ELITES, ORDINARY PEOPLE AND
'COMMUNITY OF INTEREST'.**

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ABSTRACT

The name of the third sector of broadcasting in Australia today, 'community broadcasting' gives the impression that it is something for ordinary people in the community. Indeed there have always been ordinary people involved since the concept, then called 'public broadcasting' emerged in the late 1960s. However ordinary people were almost excluded from the driving force for the establishment of the sector. Public broadcasting evolved around the development of groups with a number of 'communities of interest' including classical music buffs, university educators, people with ethnic origin, indigenous people and people who were unable to read ordinary print material. There were also groups of ordinary people who wanted to broadcast programs of interest to their local communities but these groups were a virtually powerless minority. This paper will show how two groups of elite members of the community, the classical music buffs and the university educators came to dominate the push for non-profit, non-government broadcasting and sought to maintain their position as the sector was established.

The third sector of broadcasting, involving all non-profit, non-government broadcasting, is known today as community broadcasting, a generally egalitarian concept involving ordinary people. Before the introduction of the *Broadcasting Services Act, 1992*, the sector was known as public broadcasting, with community broadcasting being just one of the defined 'communities of interest' involved. This paper will analyse power, influence and control of the third sector of Australian broadcasting during the establishment of public broadcasting until proper public broadcasting licences were issued in conjunction with Minister Tony Staley's guidelines.¹ It will be demonstrated that an elite group took over power and virtually excluded groups with other specific 'communities of interest' and ordinary people from the early decision-making process.

There have always been ordinary people involved in public broadcasting. A group that was eventually to establish the community station 2RDJ-FM in Sydney, was originally set up before any other organisation. In 1965, some volunteer radio enthusiasts, led by Kent Broadhead, started to provide taped radio type entertainment for the armed forces serving in Vietnam. Broadhead was also pressing for the opening up of the FM band.²

The following year the push for what later became public broadcasting was begun by two groups who have been remembered for their part in the establishment of the sector. They have been remembered, where people like Kent Broadhead have not, because they were elite members of the community who became part of the powerful group which took control of developments.

On 18 July, 1966, Jim Warburton, Director of the Department of Adult Education at the University of Adelaide included an educational radio station in his department's submission for funding for the 1967-1969 Triennium. This was the first concrete proposal for a radio station with 'public radio' characteristics in Australia. Although this approach was not successful, a later proposition, with private financial support, was granted a licence in 1970 under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act* for the establishment of a radio station, VL5UV, to broadcast continuing education material

only, with music totally forbidden. With these restrictions, broadcasting commenced in 1972 with Keith Conlon as station manager.³

Then, in December, 1966, Brian Cabena, who had encountered expanded broadcasting possibilities when living in Canada, held a small meeting of classical music lovers in Melbourne to discuss radio possibilities for their music. Responses to a follow up letter to *Electronics Australia* in January, 1967 led to the formation of the Music Broadcasting Society (MBS) of Victoria. In 1968 MBS made its first unsuccessful application for a licence for a listener-supported co-operative broadcasting station in Melbourne. Later, one member of the group, Trevor Jarvie, moved back to Sydney and in March, 1970 formed the Music Broadcasting Society (MBS) of NSW.⁴

These elite groups were all working hard towards the expansion of non-profit, non-government broadcasting and the opening up of the FM band in Australia when an individual, Dr Peter Pockley, became actively involved in 1973. As Director of Science Programs on the ABC, Pockley had become very aware of the limitations of broadcasting in Australia. Once he moved from the ABC to become Adviser, Public Affairs Unit at the University of NSW, Pockley was able to make his views known publicly in his submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education Science and the Arts (SSCESA) and its reference on all aspects of broadcasting. He recommended the government should establish a Public Broadcasting Authority to run public broadcasting.⁵ Although the University of NSW was not interested in expanding its station, VL2UV, licensed in 1961, the first educational radio station in Australia, into a public station, Pockley maintained his enthusiasm and was instrumental in formally constituting the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia (PBAA), on 6 July, 1974, after a conference of public broadcasters organised by the Department of the Media. He became the association's first Convener.⁶

The PBAA was founded as an organisation to lobby for the establishment and development of public broadcasting and the opening up of the FM

band throughout Australia. Pockley had realised that the diverse groups, who aspired to be public broadcasters, needed to present a cohesive face to government, if the new sector was to materialise. In this way, the power, influence and control of the new sector became vested in the PBAA. The ideals and aspirations of public broadcasters were many and varied from the beginning, representing a hotchpotch of 'communities of interest'. They included groups who wanted to broadcast for political purposes, classical music buffs, university educators, religious groups, people with ethnic origin, indigenous people and people who were unable to read ordinary print material. There were also groups of ordinary people who wanted to broadcast programs of interest to their local communities. In these early days the desire to secure licences enabled all these groups to bury their differences and work together. Everyone accepted that an elite group of well educated individuals, representing largely the university and fine music broadcasting interests, was most likely to persuade the government that it should give the introduction of public broadcasting licences and the opening up of the FM band a higher priority than it had previously. Frank Scambray, 'an ordinary working-class bloke', who helped set up 2GLF-FM for his local community of Liverpool in suburban Sydney, has pointed out that this left those members who were not part of the accepted elite in the PBAA content to stuff envelopes and lick stamps as their contribution for the time being.⁷

As the first Convener, Pockley himself advocated an elitist 'up-market' specialist form of public broadcasting which had an 'uplifting' Anglo-Celtic influence on its listeners. He was not at all excited by groups with diverse 'communities of interest', or groups of ordinary people wanting to broadcast programs directed to their local communities. In line with this philosophy, his most pressing concern was the upgrading of VL5UV to a public station and the opening up of the FM band to allow the granting of suitable licences for the two music broadcasting societies. Pockley and at least two other members of the PBAA elite, Professor Neil Runcie, Chairman and Michael Law, Board member of the NSW Music Broadcasting Society made at least one trip each to Canberra to lobby Minister for the Media, Douglas McClelland

for these licences.⁸ Other aspirants believed that if these licences were granted it would be easier to persuade the government to grant additional licences.

Not only were these experimental licences granted under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act*, in September, 1974 which involved opening up the FM band,⁹ but within another twelve months there were several other significant developments. 'Restricted commercial' licences, which were the only kind of community licence legal under the *Broadcasting and Television Act* at the time, for 3CR in Melbourne and 2CT in Campbelltown on the outskirts of Sydney, were being processed by the ABCB. Furthermore, McClelland's successor, Dr Moss Cass had offered twelve more experimental licences under the *Wireless Telegraph Act* to tertiary institutions.¹⁰ Two ethnic stations, 2EA in Sydney and 3EA in Melbourne were also established but within three months the government began to assume control of these stations and they ceased to be under the auspices of the PBAA.¹¹

With the initial offer of licences having been made, Pockley now saw the three principal tasks of immediate importance for the PBAA as 'the establishment of financial and administrative arrangements, the publication of *Broadcasting Australia*, and the establishment of the Broadcasting Legislation Study'.¹² The Broadcasting Legislation Study, constituted in November, 1975, was headed by Professor Garth Nettheim, who was a legal expert engaged by Pockley to show that the PBAA was a professional and significant organisation representing public broadcasters. The aim of the study's suggestions was to persuade the government to provide basic legal protection for the embryonic new sector, whose stations had been hurriedly and dubiously licensed under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act*.¹³

In establishing *Broadcasting Australia* Pockley designed the journal not only to 'develop into a valuable service of information for public broadcasters' but also to convince others of the stature of the new sector.¹⁴ Pockley sent *gratis* copies of the first issue of *Broadcasting Australia*, published in October 1975, to many broadcasters, bureaucrats and politicians he wished to impress.¹⁵

To accomplish his aim of presenting an elite specialist professional

image of an emerging third broadcasting sector that the government would ignore at its peril, Pockley needed money. The PBAA membership fees were insufficient to carry on the class of operation he envisaged. He argued that the government should supply funds to public broadcasters to do what the ABC either could not or would not. Submissions to the minister were fruitless.¹⁶ Eventually Pockley persuaded the Film, Television and Radio Board of the Australia Council to grant sufficient funds for administrative and travel purposes and to publish *Broadcasting Australia* in a professional manner.

As a united national lobby group with these achievements under Pockley's leadership, the association was fulfilling its founder's aims and the PBAA membership was content while it appeared that Pockley and his associates had their best interests at heart. Equilibrium was maintained while most groups were still waiting for licences. But as soon as a significant number of groups received licences there became two classes of public broadcasters, those with licences and those still waiting. The interests of these two groups did not coincide. Licensed stations became preoccupied with having their experimental licences under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act* converted to public broadcasting licences under the *Broadcasting and Television Act* with a proper legislative base to provide them with a secure existence. They were also pushing for translators to increase their coverage areas and sponsorship announcements to increase their revenue. Everyone else was still preoccupied with acquiring a licence of any description.

Furthermore there were many in both these groups who did not subscribe to Pockley's notion of generating an audience among the public by providing a high quality professional product. They were more inclined to support 'access' broadcasting where professionalism was sacrificed to let the community speak. There was a move to oust Pockley. This was achieved when the PBAA constitution was rewritten in time for the national conference and AGM in June, 1976, with provision only for station membership and not individual membership. Since Pockley was an individual without connection to a specific station, he could no

longer head the organisation.

However, the changes to the constitution did not replace the elitist Pockley with representatives with diverse 'communities of interest' or with ordinary people from community stations. Even though they promoted volunteer participation and community access in their programming, which Pockley had opposed as lacking professionalism, the new University stations all had paid managers. These were highly educated people with a professional interest in the further development of their own stations and the sector as a whole. Previously everyone, whether working towards establishing their own stations, or actively involved in the PBAA at the national level, had given their services voluntarily. The first Chairman of the PBAA, elected under the new constitution, was Keith Conlon, the paid manager of the expanded public station at the University of Adelaide, 5UV.¹⁷

Michael Law, who was Chairman of the licensed station 2MBS-FM and later paid Executive Director of the PBAA, propounded the rationale behind the new constitution claiming he had been advised that 'unless licensed stations held the power, the PBAA would not be recognised as a representative of the sector by the Government'.¹⁸ Community aspirants, most of whom had a great deal of respect for Law, were prepared to accept this explanation at the time, even though they felt left out. These avowedly working class volunteers did not feel able to stand up to the confident assertions of Law and the professionals at the University stations.¹⁹ However, in spite of Law's claims, there is no evidence that it made any difference to the government whether the PBAA was represented by licensees or aspirants. Peter Westerway, who was Assistant Secretary, Radio, in the Department at the time, has suggested that politicians' decisions are not determined by such issues but are swayed entirely by electoral support, that they dip their 'litmus paper' into people's attitudes, that 'they react to public concerns and they are very good at identifying those public concerns.'²⁰ Nevertheless, the licensed stations were determined to overawe the aspirants with their argument because they wanted to retain the power to persuade the government that the most pressing matters to be addressed for public broadcasters

were the improvements needed to make existing stations more viable rather than licensing more stations. They justified this on the grounds that licensed stations were contributing over 80% of the PBAA membership fees. To ensure this power balance was enshrined in the new constitution, two votes were given to each licensed station, while aspirant groups received only one vote. Furthermore, if the full members were unanimous in a decision they could not be outvoted by the aspirant groups, no matter how many of them were against it. Naturally, a 'them' and 'us' attitude was always just beneath the surface once the 1976 constitution was instituted. Early in 1978, in an effort to have aspirant interests represented on the PBAA committee, the NSW Public Broadcasting Association (NSWPBA) unsuccessfully put the case for regional associations to be represented on the PBAA.²¹

The Annual Conference in 1979 was the only occasion when the PBAA membership was sufficiently persuaded that more emphasis should be placed on gaining licences for low powered community groups. Frank Scamary was elected to the PBAA committee to represent these groups.²² However, once there, Scamary was a voice in the wilderness because 'people have their own barrow to push making things a little easier for themselves, relaxing sponsorship, things like that it wasn't a really successful thing. I never enjoyed it and I never felt that I got anything out of it'.²³ Scamary was not re-elected the following year and the PBAA Committee continued to be dominated by licensed full members.²⁴ Scamary was prepared to concede that the domination was not only because of the voting arrangements. 'It always seemed to me that the PBAA was heavily slanted towards the University and CAE stations, because they had people that were articulate, they had the means of disseminating information, they had photocopiers, probably even computers, and all the rest of it'.²⁵ He agreed that this control was made easier by the fact that the licensed stations also had paid staff, while the people involved with the aspirants were mostly working full time, giving their spare time to their own stations and having nothing left to give to the PBAA.

This ascendancy of the licensed stations within the PBAA was

reflected in the progress the association made with the government for developments in the sector, particularly during the time Staley was minister. Staley's first task was to finish the job begun by his predecessor, Eric Robinson, namely to finalise the guidelines, to offer a batch of proper public broadcasting licences and to regulate the new sector. Law, now the primary PBAA negotiator, worked closely with departmental officers. As a result the final version of the guidelines took into account most of the PBAA's original objections.²⁶ The fact that, although Law paid lip service to the interests of aspirants, his main thrust in lobbying politicians and bureaucrats was for the elite and the existing stations, is illustrated by the one issue on which he was unable to sway the government - the question of licence categories.

When Staley released the 'Guidelines for the Planning of Public Broadcasting in Phase 1' in a Ministerial Statement on 5 April 1978, it divided public broadcasting into three categories: Category 'E' licences to be issued to educational bodies; Category 'S' licences to be issued to groups providing special interest programmes such as music, sport, ethnic, aboriginal, religious and student unions; and Category 'C' licences to be issued to community groups intending to cover a particular geographic area. In Phase I a maximum of three medium powered FM licences were to be issued in each capital city and would be in Categories 'E' and 'S', with Category 'C' licences being issued elsewhere when frequencies were available. Further licences were to be issued later under Phase II.²⁷

In a letter to Fred Green, Secretary of the Postal and Telecommunications Department, Law had argued vigorously against the categorisation of public licences and had called for 'a single category of public broadcasting licence - with terms of reference defined by the proposals of the licence applicants, against which their performance will be judged - [this] can deal with all needs with the minimum of difficulty, and will avoid putting artificial constraints on the development of public broadcasting'.²⁸ In fact, the only 'artificial constraints' would be those that might be experienced by some of the existing stations Law represented if these categories came into effect. If there were no categories

representing different 'communities of interest', then all the existing stations, licensed under the *Wireless Telegraphy Act*, could be assured of receiving one of the new public broadcasting licences under the *Broadcasting and Television Act*. With the introduction of categories, it was feared that some of the existing stations would be excluded in favour of some of the aspirants representing particularly religious and ethnic groups, and later, community groups. Although the existing stations and the existing controlling elite of the PBAA were left in tact, with nine new stations also offered licences, this incident demonstrates clearly that the elite in the PBAA were not working for groups representing a variety of 'communities of interest' nor for ordinary people.

While Staley was minister hardly any more licences were issued after this first batch connected to the issuing of the guidelines. The only further substantial action for public broadcasters was that, towards the end of Staley's term, regulations were laid down for existing stations to use sponsorship as a means of increasing revenue and stations in difficult terrain were allowed to install translator stations to reach more people in their service areas. Both of these measures benefited licensees and were useless to those still waiting to be licensed. As the government itself had no clear policy on whether it was more important to improve the situation for licensees or licence more stations it accepted the concerns expressed by Law, as being an accurate 'litmus' test of the interests of all public broadcasters. The government had little alternative as it was not aware of how inaccurate this was since, during Minister Staley's time, the PBAA was not lobbying on behalf of the aspirants' best interests.

This paper has shown that an elite group took control of public broadcasters' interests from the beginning and that as the sector became established the professionals managing some of the larger stations had become quite a power clique, very much looking after their own interests. This type of controlling situation was by no means confined to public broadcasting. As Bob Browning has pointed out, it was common in many voluntary organisations in the 1970s, which were taken over by self-styled reformers. This 'New Class', as Browning called them, generally

managed to monopolised their organisations' public voice to government.²⁹ The fact that what was happening in public broadcasting was part of a trend in the larger community did nothing to give the aspirant groups, representing a diverse range of 'communities of interest' and the ordinary people in public broadcasting an avenue to voice their own concerns.

In years to come this would lead to groups with three particular communities of interest', namely progressive political views, ethnic concerns and aboriginal concerns, breaking away from the PBAA, forming their own organisations and reducing the domination of the control and influence of public broadcasting by the elite in the PBAA.³⁰ However, throughout the 1970s this elite group maintained its grip on power and the development of the third sector of broadcasting in Australia was not at all egalitarian.

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