

Special Broadcasting Service in the Banana Republic – Quo Vadis?

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Amalgamation of the Special Broadcasting Service with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation would mark a particularly low ebb in contemporary Australian society. In one crazy moment Australia would be dragged kicking and screaming into the 1950s, firmly embedded as the minor banana colony of the Treasurer's fantasy/dreams, without sense of past, present or future.

Michael Duffy, Minister for Communications, met with the Board of the SBS in March 1986. He gave them his firm commitment that in the life of this government and under his Ministry, amalgamation was a dead issue. No member of his Department, he claimed, would be allowed to spend one moment in discussing, planning or implementing such a program. Duffy had been rolled by Cabinet colleagues on his proposition that there should be just one Australian national broadcaster. Only his erstwhile comrade John Button supported the policy of combining the SBS and the ABC into one organisation. Duffy left the Cabinet meeting a bitter man, convinced of the correctness of his position and bemused by the unprincipled capitulation to public ethnic pressure of his Ministerial mates, apparent to him.

The budget crisis has provided an opportunity to get his own back, to have Cabinet -

particularly Hawke and Keating - eat humble pie, and to achieve his goal of one (Multicultural?) broadcaster able to encompass the diversity of Australian society and develop a flexible broadcasting strategy, appropriate to that diversity. It is mainstreaming with a vengeance, an ill thought out policy only possible for those who have always been powerful and have never experienced the struggle to affirm a sense of identity and purpose in an Anglo Australian milieu intolerant of diversity and cynical and patronising towards cultural differences.

Multiculturalism has been shown to be a luxury good for Hawke, Keating, Walsh and Duffy and his Cabinet mates, effective ethnic and multicultural broadcasting as an integral part of contemporary Australia can be cast adrift - to be submerged in an organisation (the ABC) which has shown, despite its ostensible 'multicultural charter', that it can pervert the concept and avoid the responsibilities that have had to be taken up by the SBS.

So what will be lost if the amalgamation goes ahead? Firstly, a unique identity, and the symbolic recognition of the legitimate cultural differences that are acceptable in Australia in the 1980s. Of course SBS has had an uphill battle for survival as a cobbled together bureaucracy strung between a Byzantine cornucopia of radio broadcasters on the one hand, and refugees from ABC television on the other. In archaic conditions in radio, and with the hand-me-downs and coat-hangers of the Packer empire for equipment in television, SBS has managed to achieve a rather amazing transformation in expectations amongst those Australians who could receive it.

The question of television reception demonstrates the historic refusal of the Minister to counteract the racist prerogatives of his

Department and allow SBS to escape consignment to the Hell's Island of UHF - Ultra Hard to Find, as SBS TV's George Donikian refers to the new ultra high frequency.

Despite strong protests and unanimous condemnation, the Minister ordered SBS off the one channel the majority of the population understood how to use. As the toy and plaything of the Department of Communications, SBS has had to battle against cynicism and racism in the bureaucracy, political opportunism in the public arena and until recently, decayed management inside the organisation itself. Yet SBS now exists as the one remaining element of concern with social justice in the cultural arena the one desperately flapping flag that marks a sense of vision and adventure, and the cosmopolitanism that has been all but abandoned in other areas of social and cultural policy.

What else will be lost? An important part of the struggle against racism in Australian cultural life has occurred into the SBS. This is not because SBS has been either evangelical or squeaky clean itself - its structure of anglo males dominating the lower echelon ethnics and women is not defensible. However a political commitment by some board members to democratic participation and ethnic rights has led to the formulation of strategies to overcome racism in the SBS and more widely in the media. (At the end of July the government sacked the two SBS board members most active on these issues - George Zangalis and myself). The strategy on racism was developed in co-operation with media unions, ethnic and Aboriginal groups.

It was to be put into practice in conjunction with the Human Rights Commission and the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs. Both these organisations have met the axe. The government's withdrawal from serious action on national land rights for Aborigines, its capitulation to the Blainey line on immigration, its witch hunt of illegal aliens, and now the SBS decision these are symbols one after another of an effective return to assimilationist, white anglo supremacy policies in another form. Ethnics are

now to assimilate into the mainstream - to have access and equity but no autonomy or individuality.

There are some other issues percolating through the proposals for SBS. After all, support for amalgamation in the past has come from Geoffrey Whitehead of the ABC, who has presented a post amalgamation scenario in which the EA stations with the most effective audience reach of any radio stations in Australia and the only government program which regularly communicates with ethnic groups - would become sub-corporations of the ABC. SBS TV would effectively become the ABC's second channel, with all its competing programs in news and current affairs presumably abolished, and 'low rating' ethnic stuff consigned to the wee hours. The Hawke commitment to reducing the Commonwealth Public Service by 2000 people would not be embarrassed by the imminent appointment, the outcome of years of industrial action, of some 300 permanent public servants in the radio area.

Since 1984 the EA stations programs have been provided by independent 'contractors' as co-ordinators and broadcasters. In June the first round of advertisements were issued to fill these formerly contract positions with professional broadcasters, would be employees of the SBS, and Commonwealth Public Servants. It is not clear whether this process will continue (or indeed whether the radio stations will continue at all, or will be replaced by a program packaging unit to service the public broadcasting sector). If the permanency exercise does continue it will likely be on a very much lessened scale and appointments will be to a statutory corporation or enterprise (the ABC or its EA station offshoots). Thus there will be no more public servants from this source - a simple and cynical sleight of hand.

The whole amalgamation thing is supposed to save money. No one has been able to identify these savings, and this was not from want of trying. The Connor Review of the SBS in 1985 couldn't find any, nor could the Dept. of Finance in its submission to the Review nor the

management consultants employed by the Review. The ABC couldn't identify any in its bid for takeover, nor could the SBS in resisting the bid. In the practice of the post Connor period of close consultation and co-operation between SBS and the ABC no savings have been made.

So the amalgamation proposition reduces to a rather furtive sham - a devious move by Duffy to get his own preference despite its demonstrated ineffectiveness, to one-up his Cabinet mates who made him feel bad before. For Hawke and Keating it's a symbolic declaration that they are prepared to take the tough decisions, that the ethnics too are not sacrosanct and must be made to suffer. (This latter rational is a dead giveaway - as multicultural television if not ethnic radio benefits all Australian society in a multitude of ways).

Barry Unsworth learned in Rockdale that cynical political opportunism is transparently obvious - and the back-peddalling on human rights and equity issues engaged in by the Federal Government is no less obvious. Just because the Hawke/ Keating/ Duffy axis grazes in its Anglocentric meadow does not mean that millions of Australians of more cosmopolitan outlook smile on benignly as they chew. The hard fought-for means of cultural identity and relevant communication which SBS represents and the ABC does not, cannot be lightly removed. The ABC has consistently demonstrated its incapacity for cultural sensitivity. It is a pity the one lesson the government has learnt from the ABC is this same insensitivity and ethnocentrism.