



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

SPEECH

Tuesday, 19 March 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 19 March 2013
Page 2113
Questioner
Speaker Faulkner, Sen John

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator FAULKNER (New South Wales) (20:53): Australians love cricket—playing it, watching it and talking about it. We also love the sound of cricket on ABC radio. For generations Australians have grown up listening to test match cricket on ABC local radio. Listening to cricket on the radio, wherever it is played, is a familiar pastime and a cherished memory for many Australians.

Unfortunately, in recent times the ABC has made a decision—perhaps driven by budget or financial considerations—not to broadcast test match cricket played overseas. Last year in April, when Australia played a three-test series in the West Indies for the Frank Worrell Trophy, the ABC was not there. They did not send a commentary team to cover the tour. The ABC would not stump up for any commentators or even any news presence in the West Indies. Surely, with *Grandstand* regular Geoff Lawson in the Caribbean working with Fox Sports, the ABC could have had him give updates for the news. This year many Australian cricket fans have been disappointed by the ABC because it decided not to send a commentary team to India to broadcast the current series there. I do have some sympathy with the ABC in relation to the decision about the series in India, as the ABC is not the only broadcaster playing off the back foot against the Board of Control for Cricket in India, the BCCI. But the Indian tour is the second overseas tour within 12 months where the ABC has not met its responsibility to cricket lovers and has refused to spend money to cover Australia's national sport.

The national broadcaster has been broadcasting test match cricket since December 1924. In that year, commentary on radio during the first test against England at the SCG was provided by Monty Noble, who had captained Australia in 15 Ashes tests between 1903 and 1909 and whose name was given to the northern stand of the Sydney Cricket Ground. Monty, along with Len Watt, provided commentary. Len was a former Sydney grade cricketer. In those days, the commentators sat and watched from inside the old scoreboard and every 15 minutes announced the score on Broadcasters (Sydney) Ltd, or 2BL as it came to be known. In 1925 Bill Smallacombe broadcast the first ever ball-by-ball cricket coverage on 5CL radio, although it went live only to Adelaide listeners. Bill Smallacombe was the sole commentator for the entire seven-day test. I have given some long speeches in

my time—many would say too long—but seven days of ball-by-ball coverage is a tremendous effort in anybody's language.

It was another decade before the ABC would begin to cover cricket from abroad. During the 1934 Ashes tour, the famous synthetic broadcasts began. These synthetic broadcasts were based on telegrams sent from England. Commentators used every trick they could to replicate the sound of play and paint wonderful word pictures of play they could not see. The next year Alan McGilvray—who played 20 first-class matches for New South Wales, scoring 684 runs at an average of 24.42 and taking 20 wickets with his medium paces at 56.75—made his ABC commentary debut. McGilvray would become the voice of ABC cricket commentary right through to 1985, commenting on over 200 test matches. The next Ashes tour in England would be based on short-wave technology, with the synthetic broadcasts only filling in when the signal dropped out. By the 1960s, the overseas ball-by-ball coverage was as clean and as continuous as local coverage.

The ABC travelled to all corners of the cricket-playing globe to bring cricket into the homes of Australians. It had provided continuous coverage of all Australian tests in the West Indies since 1965 before last year's disappointing decision to abandon the Caribbean broadcast. In 1947, when India played their first ever test series as an independent nation, here in Australia against Bradman's team, the ABC was there to cover the five-test series.

In 1998, in the series known as the Tendulkar versus Warne series, the ABC was there. Shane Warne had taken 68 scalps in the 1997 calendar year and Sachin Tendulkar, the 'Little Master', had knocked out over 1,000 runs. They were both at the top of their game and they were both the best in the business. Australia could not match the Indians with the bat or the ball, and India took an unassailable two-nil series lead—although, I must say that there was a brilliant Mark Waugh century and there was a fight-back by Australia for a consolation win in the final test of that series.

When Australia won their world record 16th consecutive test win in Mumbai in 2001, the ABC was there. The next week, when the VVS Laxman and Rahul Dravid put together that famous partnership and India won after being forced to follow-on, the

ABC was there. In 2004, when Michael Clarke made a century on debut and Australia won their first test series in India since Bill Lawry's team in 1969, the ABC was there. In 2010 there was a scheduling clash and, I think understandably, the Commonwealth games, which were held in India at the same time as the cricket, took centre stage. The ABC was not there to cover the cricket.

But in 2013 nothing—nothing at all. In 2013 ABC listeners were not allowed to hear the joy of another Michael Clarke century as they heard in 2004. ABC listeners were not allowed to hear of the tension and, as far as Aussie cricket fans are concerned, the agony as Australia toiled against another remarkable 300-plus run partnership from the Indians as they did in 2001.

Later this week ABC listeners will not be able to hear the Australian cricketers again give it their all and try for a consolation win as they did in 1998. But there is no excuse this time. There is no scheduling clash as there was in 2010. But even more remarkably, there is no excuse regarding a scheduling clash, as the ABC has a dedicated, full-time, 24-hour, seven-day-a-week sports channel on digital radio. Apparently the ABC bean counters decided that sending a team to commentate in India would cost too much money. Apparently ABC programming officers decided that 120-odd hours of test cricket in April was too much. I do note for the record that some believe there can never be too much cricket on the radio—people like Senator Moore, for example!

Tonight I would like to provide what little background I can on the decision of the ABC not to send a commentary team to India to broadcast the cricket on the radio in Australia. A similar disappointment almost occurred for British cricket fans during the recent English cricket tour of India. The BBC had a long-running arrangement with the BCCI to broadcast test cricket in India. It has been reported that the BCCI demanded an additional \$80,000 be paid by the BBC for the use of commentary boxes on top of the broadcasting licence. The BBC, unlike the ABC, refused to pull up stumps and came to an agreement with the BCCI.

I have searched the media for details of the asking price from the BCCI to the ABC for the current test series, but I have not found a figure. I do hope the range of questions I have placed on notice to the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy will shed some light on the circumstances surrounding this decision, not only about the demands of the BCCI but also the price paid for ABC radio broadcasting rights for other sporting fixtures. I am interested to hear how much was paid for the rights to broadcast the last Olympic Games and the last Commonwealth Games.

How much does the ABC pay for these sporting fixtures and how many hours of radio do they produce? How much does the ABC pay for the cricket tests played here at home each year? How much does the ABC pay for the domestic one-day competition and the Big Bash? How much is paid for how many hours of broadcasting?

How much did the ABC pay for the broadcasting of the England Lions cricket tour, which I might add was broadcast on the ABC digital channel on day one of the first test in India. I know cricket lovers who were very surprised to hear no cricket broadcast on ABC local radio so they tuned into ABC digital radio expecting to hear Australia playing India only to hear coverage of a tour match between Australia A and the England Lions.

I would also like to know how much the ABC pays for Shute Shield coverage on television or to the NRL for radio broadcasts? And how many of these fixtures are not broadcast nationally? How much does the ABC pay for coverage of AFL and how much do they pay for reserve grade AFL? Again, how much of this is not broadcast to all states and territories in the Commonwealth?

I have to admit that I expect limited information will be forthcoming in the answers I receive from the minister, because the information I am requesting may be considered by the ABC to be commercial-in-confidence. But, if so, I will continue to press questions about the priorities the ABC has extended in relation to its sports coverage, how those priorities are set, who makes the decisions and why they make them.

In a recent submission to the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee inquiry into the provisions of the Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Digital Radio) Bill 2007 and the Radio Licence Fees Amendment Bill 2007, the ABC said:

ABC Radio produces a lot of content that competes for airtime on its existing analog stations, content such as news and sport, specialist information, cultural and music programming. Digital radio provides the potential to offer new services, to meet the needs of audiences that are currently not consistently served—either by the ABC or by the commercial or community stations.

I sympathise with the schedulers of ABC Local radio. I am sure time zones and playing times for test cricket in India must cause programming headaches. The day's play commences around 3 pm, Eastern Daylight Savings Time, and finishes around 10 pm. This means that radio *Drive* programs and evening programs would be disrupted or cancelled on a number of weekdays.

Another headache, of course, may be the clash with football codes. For example, in Sydney and Brisbane, I expect rugby league would take precedence over some test match sessions on Friday night, Saturday afternoon or night and Sunday afternoon, but the first two tests in India were played before the footy season even started. This is precisely what the ABC were talking about when they expressed their support for digital radio to the Senate in the last few years. The benefit of digital radio is that you can avoid these scheduling clashes; footy and cricket can both get a guernsey.

The ABC claims to be committed to the expansion of digital radio. What better way to promote digital radio to cricket-lovers across Australia than to broadcast the tests in full on the digital channel if they are not going to be broadcast on local radio. I think there may well be other alternatives that the ABC could have employed to keep listeners aware of developments in the test matches. As I mentioned, ABC cricket coverage has not always been ball-by-ball coverage. Why, without ball-by-ball coverage, could the radio presenters on air not at least give regular cricket updates? Surely *Drive* and evening presenters could provide a quick score update every 10 or 15 minutes, just like Monty Noble and Len Watt did way back in 1924.

What is the ABCs response to criticism that they let down sports fans across Australia? I find it extraordinary that the ABC have published an internet promotion on their website for an internet-based, audio only, siphoned broadcast from England. Test Match Sofa is a group of dedicated cricket fans who watch the BBC, or other coverage of test cricket, from their couch and provide commentary over the Net. Some might even consider this piracy, but it is certainly not a substitute for ABC coverage. The technologically less advanced—I admit, people like myself—have trouble accessing such internet-based feeds and it is not possible to hear this coverage when you are away from a computer anyway. You have got no hope if you are in the car driving, for example.

I do sympathise with the ABC accountants. I understand that the ABC is not immune to budget pressures. I sympathise with the ABC schedulers, which is why I would be happy to see the cricket broadcast on the digital channel in certain circumstances. But the ABC does need to seriously rethink its approach to broadcasting international cricket. I understand that the ABC has committed to covering the away Ashes tour. That is a no-brainer! For heaven's sake, it has done that for every Ashes tour since World War II. I hope that cricket-lovers can be assured that the ABC will work with the relevant authorities in South African cricket to secure the broadcasting rights for the three tests we will play in South Africa next year. I also hope that the ABC's

decision to abandon the recent series in the Caribbean and on the Subcontinent will never, ever be repeated.