

SE Features  
HD **SCUTTling OUR VOICE IN THE REGION IS A STEP TOO FAR**

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Beware those tinpot countries keen to fill the void

THE federal government's decision to axe the Australia Network -- yet to be announced publicly but revealed exclusively in this newspaper on Thursday -- is a classic case of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

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Reform it, cut costs, limit the scope of the network's reach, put a contract to operate it back out to tender, beef up the soft diplomacy edict of the network's **operations** or recalibrate programming decisions as to what it airs.

Any or all of these adjustments to how the \$220 **million** Australia Network functions are well worth considering, perhaps even necessary.

But scrapping it is fundamentally against Australia's national interests, and would leave a dangerous broadcasting void in our region.

The Department of Foreign Affairs funds the Australia Network because of the soft diplomacy value of Australian broadcasting reaching the television sets of our neighbours.

The reach of the network -- into India, across the Asian region and throughout the South Pacific -- is arguably broader than might be necessary. But that is a debate for limiting the scope of the network, not scrapping it altogether.

The problem with the decision to terminate the Australia Network is the void it creates in broadcasting, most notably in the South Pacific region. That void will quickly be filled by other powers, such as **China** via its CCTV network, with their soft diplomatic aims being brought to bear on countries such as Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

And you can bet the **Chinese** will make a better fist of it than we have. You won't see the **Chinese** equivalent of trumped-up allegations that Australian naval personnel deliberately burnt asylum-seekers' hands getting an airing on CCTV. In fact, you won't see the many genuine stories of human rights abuses in **China** airing on CCTV programming beamed into countries currently taking our Australia Network.

The soft diplomatic arms race in our immediate region is already being won by **China**, as it facilitates infrastructure developments and the like that the Australian government is struggling to compete with. At a time when our aid budget is coming under renewed pressure, the **Chinese** are expanding theirs -- not for the purpose of goodwill, but for the national advantage such goodwill can **lead** to.

It is not out of the question that one day soon we'll see **Chinese** military bases in South Pacific nations. These tinpot countries -- yes, I'm being disrespectful -- are struggling for survival in the modern world. We see on a regular basis how up-for-**sale** their votes and their support are on everything from UN lobbying to housing asylum-seekers we don't have the intestinal fortitude to take care of ourselves.

There is little doubt that, as things currently stand, the soft diplomatic value of the Australia Network is questionable. More re-runs of trashy Australian drama would do more for our national interest than some of the current affairs Tony Abbott is concerned about (even if his way of expressing such concerns was beyond clumsy).

But vacating the space will only usher in alternative programming from overseas, with **China** most likely to take up the opportunity. That was what happened at the beginning of this millennium, between the time the Seven Network ceased servicing what was then called Australia Television International and the ABC stepped in to take over.

Nations in the South Pacific are dependent on the Australia Network for year-round content to supplement their own very limited national broadcasting. The network might be little more than a low-grade channel for expats in larger nations throughout central and Southeast Asia, but in the South Pacific it is much more central to cultural life. Those countries will welcome any substitute programming other powers are prepared to offer if we pull out.

What is likely to happen to South Pacific cultural life when programming from the world's largest authoritarian regime steps into the breach?

Our ability to influence directly within our region will take a further hammering, right at a time when it is already under pressure from growing **Chinese** investment. This is why the government must embrace the tough task of reforming the operation of the Australia Network rather than taking the easy option and terminating it. A dysfunctional network, as I would argue the Australia Network currently is, may represent little more than a blocking agent to outside influences.

It may even from time to time do us harm when it reports on news not flattering to Australia. But these aren't reasons for a government searching for savings.

The notion that the Australia Network should be subjected to greater government control in terms of what it broadcasts isn't an easy thing for anyone who supports a free media to get their heads around. But it should be.

Unlike domestic media **operations**, which should be, and hopefully always will be, anything but a mouthpiece for the government of the day (whatever their various ideological leanings), the Australia Network is supposed to do the government's bidding in our region.

Whether that means controlled release of current affairs, removing current affairs reporting from the network because it doesn't serve a diplomatic purpose or simply broadcasting re-runs of Australian drama -- because that tells a positive tale about Australian life -- that is the role of the network.

All of this is perhaps why a fresh look at who runs the network is worth considering. The public needs to be mindful that if the network were run, for example, directly by government -- albeit utilising content from existing domestic networks -- there is a risk it morphs into a propaganda unit targeting expat votes instead of soft diplomacy.

Nonetheless, when one considers that the primary role of the network is soft diplomacy -- which essentially means doing the bidding of the government of the day -- something isn't right when that bidding is being done by the national broadcaster or, for that matter, by any other commercial media operation.

There is no easy answer as to how to fix the Australia Network in a way that helps it better serve the purpose for which it was designed. Certainly, it needs to be scaled back and be better targeted.

But terminating it is rash, reactionary and will ultimately be counterproductive to our national interests.

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