



Speech by

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ABC NEWSRADIO, TOWNSVILLE

Ms NELSON-CARR (Mundingburra—ALP) (11.46 a.m.): Townsville is well served by commercial radio stations and by ABC local radio, along with the quality ABC Radio National, Classic FM and Triple J networks. But, like most other regional Australian cities, Townsville continues to be denied access to ABC NewsRadio. Regardless of where in Australia people live, they should be able to tune into this important and highly commended radio service provided by the national broadcaster. It is more than 10 years since NewsRadio started, but in Townsville and elsewhere in north Queensland we still cannot listen to it. While the regions are being penalised by reason of geography, anyone who resides in or close to the capital cities of Newcastle, the Gold Coast and Gosford can listen if they so choose.

The Howard government has steadfastly refused to fund an extended coverage of NewsRadio despite the fact that ABC management and NewsRadio management and staff are reportedly anxious for that to happen. I am somewhat sceptical of a statement that was issued by the National Party candidate for Kennedy at the weekend that a re-elected coalition government would expand ABC NewsRadio coverage. Since when? This was a statement coming out of the blue without anyone in government backing it up. Given the coalition's past record on NewsRadio and its disregard for people living in regional areas, the statement must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

If what has happened—or perhaps I should say what has not happened—with NewsRadio is any guide, it is highly likely that we would still be waiting for Triple J in Townsville had it not been extended to the regions during the time of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. The same goes for SBS, which was also able to broaden its coverage area when Labor was in office. In the *Australian* on 1 July there was an account of NewsRadio's 10th birthday. Its headline read 'Birthday Wish for ABC's NewsRadio'. It referred to a sitting of the Senate estimates committee during which Senator Rod Kemp commended the ABC on the general quality of NewsRadio, calling it an excellent service. Despite that full-on praise, when the ABC's managing director, Russell Balding, told Senate estimates that extended reach for NewsRadio was what he desired and hoped for, Senator Kemp was reported as saying, 'In that case I recommend that you continue to pursue your desire.' Mr Balding's response was, 'Show us the colour of the money and we will extend the reach of NewsRadio.' The story in the *Australian* ended in this way: at last report the colour of the money had not changed and the news junkies of Ballarat, Wollongong, Townsville and the rest will have to wait for a couple more birthdays yet.

In June 2003 there was an absurd suggestion in federal government circles in Townsville at least that Radio National could be taken off the air in north Queensland and replaced by NewsRadio at no cost. The proposition was outrageous. Radio National's first-class programming has a devoted audience in north Queensland and is quite different in style and content to NewsRadio. As could be expected, there was a sustained public outcry in Townsville in support of Radio National and that piece of coalition claptrap died the death it deserved. NewsRadio should be accessible right now to regional Australia in its own right along with all other ABC services but not at the expense of one of them.

ABC television occasionally runs promos for NewsRadio, Australia's only continuous news network, which is more than a little incongruous when a large percentage of Australians cannot get it on their radio dial. Being accessible on the web is not the same as being able to tune in on the good old radio!

The amount of money needed to extend coverage of NewsRadio to north Queensland and other regional locations would be relatively small in the communication scheme of things. But, like all the diatribe coming out of the office of Peter Lindsay and his confusion about federal and state government roles, rather than looking after his Herbert constituents with appropriate federal support like road funding so desperately needed, port access so desperately needed, nursing home places for an ageing population, et cetera, he instead sends out ridiculous surveys about local and state government issues. He whips out the old curfew for young people ratbagery, and today he has even weighed into a local council street issue.

I think that, no, we will not be seeing NewsRadio in the north. In this day and age there is absolutely no excuse for people in regional Australia not to have access to the same specialised ABC radio services as capital city dwellers. Roll on NewsRadio!