

Collision of Values
by Keith Jackson
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I arrived in Wewak in November 1963. I was 18 and had just finished teacher training at the Australian School of Pacific Administration. A decade later, by the end of 1973, I'd spent three years teaching in the Chimbu, a year editing school publications in Konedobu, two years as an ABC producer at Boroko, and four years managing government radio stations in Rabaul and Bougainville. I'd also just returned from six months as a UNESCO consultant in Java - and was very glad to be back in Papua New Guinea. National Independence wasn't far away. The National Broadcasting Commission was about to be inaugurated. It was an exciting time.

In December 1973, Sam Piniâu, a Tolai, became the first chairman of the NBC. We'd been friends since 1970, when I'd succeeded him as manager of Radio Bougainville. We had a lot in common – including a desire to do whatever we could to ensure that PNG's journey to independence was focussed on the requirements of the people not their administrators.

On Bougainville, the new copper mine was provoking increasing problems as a result of land expropriation and the influx of workers from outside the island. Handing over the station, Sam explained that Radio Bougainville was reviled for its pro-Government, anti-islander broadcasts. It was known colloquially as "Radio Ashton," after the District Commissioner. The Napidakoe Navitu secessionist group called it a propaganda machine and regarded its staff as colonial puppets. In angry protest at its broadcasts, villagers smashed their radios with axes and burned them.

The simple instruction I'd received from Konedobu was to – quote - "straighten out the station." In practical terms, this involved a range of activities including expunging the influence of the District Commissioner and his cohorts, taking advice from village leaders about what Bougainvilleans wanted to know and hear, offering people a greater say in what was broadcast, recruiting and training young men and women from dissident areas to work at the station, holding huge concerts featuring string bands and dancers from Bougainville, and patrolling rural areas armed only with tape recorders to record the traditional songs and stories of the people.

This policy eventually resulted in an altercation with the District Commissioner, after which he demanded that the Department of Information remove me from the island. The Department backed me up and, soon after, Ashton himself left. A year later, with one eye on my future, I accepted a UNESCO consultancy that took me to Java for six months.

I returned to Papua New Guinea on the eve of the establishment of the National Broadcasting Commission in December 1973. The NBC merged the ABC's PNG Service

with the Department of Information's Government Broadcasting Service. I found most of my expat station manager colleagues going finish or on transfer to Moresby. Sam Piniau, from the former government service, was chairman, but the ABC guys had secured most of the plum jobs for themselves. They had no position for me. They reckoned I had form as a troublemaker and froze me out. But Piniau wanted me around and asked what I wanted to do.

I said he should create a policy secretariat and give me two professional staff. So the ABC blokes found an office for us opposite the men's toilet. It was a good base from which to plan a future for the NBC, because we could see all the comings and goings. I was 28 and unfazeable - but I made sure that those unreconstructed ABC types had no role in the future of the NBC. They might have been well meaning but, by and large, they had little knowledge of PNG and little affection for it. Moresby was bottom rung on the ABC's ladder of corporate status. It was even below Darwin.

Almost from the beginning, the NBC leadership was under pressure from the politicians. Not only to deliver effective national and regional broadcasting services, but also to dilute political opponents' access to the airwaves. In the Secretariat, we were developing a national broadcast strategy, in the form of a five-year plan, while advising on how best to deal with the many contingent issues that were arising in the course of our day to day operations. These included a number of clashes within the NBC as we tried to drive policy change that would lead to carving out a new PNG-oriented broadcasting organisation.

The internecine warfare – essentially between expatriates – raged through '74 and '75, culminating in a showdown when the ABC accountant tabled an expenditure budget of K11m in the face of a government offer of 6m. The budget planning process froze. Cutting the estimates by half was beyond all of us. Eventually the Secretariat was tasked to prepare a zero-base budget – and, with that act, ABC influence in the NBC was effectively finished.

The K6m appropriation proved to be contractionary for the NBC. By early '75 it was evident that capital expansion was in jeopardy. That meant so was our mission to enable the people to have access to effective broadcasting services in languages they could understand. The provision of reliable information and targeted education programs are vital planks in both economic and political development. The ABC and the Australian government were leaving behind a barely adequate infrastructure. Now the architects of this mess were walking away with the job half done. Where would the investment funds come from?

At the same time, the Central Planning Office was seeking to expand government influence over the NBC by drawing us into its bureaucratic web, but it didn't seem much interested in what we saw as our basic problems of service provision.

Then, in July 1975, just before Independence, we were told our K6m allocation might be cut by 2m because Chief Minister Michael Somare had been angered by what he called

“bad reporting,” including leaked details of a mini-budget. Our appropriation was eventually cut to a bit over K5m. When we were asked what we would do to make the savings, we said we’d have to get rid of 80 staff and reduce broadcast hours. We were told to make the cuts without reducing staff or hours. In September, the month of Independence, Somare wrote to the NBC saying we should commence radio advertising as soon as possible and in the following month we launched a public inquiry into commercial broadcasting on the NBC.

By January 1976, plans for commercial broadcasting were progressing. The response to our public consultation was mixed but, sensitive to the social cost argument, we framed a regulatory system that we believed would restrain the worst excesses of advertising. This included restricting it to the English-language service.

Under the NBC Act we had authority to introduce commercial broadcasting without further reference to Parliament but we knew approval from the National Executive Council would be a political necessity. Then the Central Planning Office, where my good friend (but, on this issue, fierce opponent) John Langmore was very influential, indicated it was totally opposed to commercial broadcasting and then Treasury told us it would plunder two-thirds of our net revenue from advertising to help plug a projected K20m deficit in the national budget.

Meanwhile the Central Planning Office was trying to centralise the coordination of all information media. With government control versus broadcasting autonomy on the agenda, the scene was being set for a full-scale confrontation and the battlefield seemed increasingly likely to be our efforts to introduce commercial broadcasting.

By March 1976 the CPO was working actively against commercial broadcasting while we were pressing the National Executive Council to give its blessing to approve what was already enshrined in our Act. According to our Minister, Reuben Taureka, we had the numbers in NEC but the matter was deferred again and again as the NEC tried to come to grips with the conflicting advice it was receiving.

Finally, in late March, there was a fiery Cabinet meeting in which Pita Lus threatened to punch Taureka if he persisted in arguing his submission. Frustrated by government indecision, the next day the NBC Board decided to introduce advertising under Section 12 of the Act and all hell broke loose when the decision was announced on our 9 pm news.

The first manifestation of official displeasure at the Board’s decision came immediately with a phone call from Somare’s press secretary, Paul Cowdy, ordering me to defuse the situation. I had more chance of defusing a free falling 1000 lb bomb. Then, the next evening at our usual drinking haunt at the Boroko Sports Club, an apparatchik from the CPO approached me saying my job was on the line if the NBC didn’t back off its decision.

Not long after this, Somare wrote to Sam Piniou describing our unit as arrogant, overzealous, unprofessional and disregarding of authority. That was enough for me. I was gone within a month leaving behind a discouraged NBC Board, an angry Prime Minister, a divided Cabinet and an agitated Central Planning Office.

Under continuing pressure from the CPO, the government eventually decided to amend the Broadcasting Act to remove the NBC's right to introduce commercial broadcasting. Then, in a dramatic day in the House of Assembly in early February 1977, the bill was defeated 41-31 on the floor of the house and on 1 March 1977 radio advertising was introduced on the NBC's English-language service. Phil Charley, here today and just awarded an Order of Australia for his services to broadcasting in Australia and our region, had guided it to fruition.

The conflict over Radio Bougainville had presented a value collision between colonial administration and the imperatives of broadcasting. The argument over the direction of the NBC at the time of its establishment had presented a value collision between the ABC old guard, brought up in the traditions of Australian public broadcasting, and the NBC's Young Turks seeking a new way in PNG broadcasting. The poisonous dispute over whether the NBC should seek funding from advertising had presented a value collision between an ideology concerned about the need for centralism, and the evils of commercialism, and the more pragmatic response of the NBC to the impact of budget shortfalls on our ability to contribute to national development.

There is more to all these stories, of course, but 30 years on we're able to discern that, as the colonial twilight settled on PNG, the people sent there as administrators and advisers themselves had anything but a unified and coherent view of how some critical national issues should be handled.

Not only that, we adopted strongly adversarial postures in trying to win through. In my resignation letter to the NBC, I apologised for leaving behind a mess, which I, perhaps patronisingly, attributed to squabbling between white men. But, on reflection, at base that interpretation probably wasn't too far from the truth.

In 1978, two years after I left PNG, I sat in my Unesco office in Male in the Maldivian Islands and opened the week's mail from Colombo. Out of a beaten up envelope a ribboned medallion fell to the desk. It was an Independence Medal and it was accompanied by a cheerful letter from Sam Piniou. The ledger had been balanced.

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