

**70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Radio Australia Address  
Melbourne**

**1 December 2009**

Ladies and gentlemen,

We're here to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Radio Australia.

A good place to start might be to ask what anniversaries are all about.

My wife would answer that anniversaries are days on which her husband always manages to be overseas.

But seriously, I think anniversaries are about three things.

They celebrate the existence of something or someone by remembering their beginning.

They are a way of making us focus on someone's or something's achievements – not only in terms of longevity but also of enduring impact or significance.

And they are also about looking forward, saying “look at where we've come; and where is it that we are going?”

And it's entirely appropriate that we do all three things this evening.

First, we should celebrate Radio Australia's existence by remembering its beginning.

Radio Australia was a child of the great ideological contests of the twentieth century.

It was born of a concern over the amount of foreign broadcasting that was coming into Australia, and a determination to speak back with an Australian voice – if not immediately with an Australian accent.

International broadcasting has profoundly shaped the world in which we live – and very much for the better.

Its role on the front lines of the Cold War demonstrated the power of the idea that governments can trust their people with privacy and rights, and that to allow the operation of a free, critical and non-credulous media, which was prepared to hold any

and all governments to account, was not a formula for chaos but for vibrancy and social resilience.

Its role beyond the Cold War is every bit as revolutionary.

A slow tide is making its way through closed and traditional societies: a general belief in the sovereignty of opinion, the catalytic role of choice, and the banishing of fatalism of background and circumstance.

It is spurred by talkback radio, reality TV and blogging, and has become a powerful democratic force for accountability in government.

We should not underestimate the role of institutions such as Radio Australia in this revolution.

Because what it tells us is that the content is less important than the integrity and honesty of the media that conveys that content.

Radio Australia was, and is, ultimately a mirror that Australian society holds up to itself and a picture frame through which it presents itself to the outside world.

Ultimately it is the way radio Australia works rather than what it broadcasts that is its most important message.

An open, non-credulous, credible source of news and opinion.

Relentlessly innovative, fiercely independent, locally aware and empathetic.

This is a proud tradition built up over seven decades, and it must be fostered over the next seven.

Second, let's think about Radio Australia's achievements, not the least of which is its longevity.

What needs to be noted is the sheer resilience of radio despite the relentless invention and rollout of newer media.

Nothing, it seems, has been able to consign the wireless to the scrap heap of CB radio, cassette tapes or video tapes.

Despite repeated predictions of its demise, radio is as popular a medium now as it has been at any time over the past 70 years.

I think what ultimately explains the resilience of radio is its simplicity and flexibility.

Radio's cheapness of production, simplicity of transmission, and ease of access must make it the Kalashnikov of the media technology world.

It has made it endlessly adaptable to local tastes and changing preferences.

Most importantly, it has given radio the ability to fit seamlessly into increasingly multi-tasked lives.

For me, as for many Australians, ABC radio is what first connected me to the world, that first hooked me on the unpredictability, horror, futility and hope of international affairs.

It continues to do so.

Finally, given the last 70 years, where is radio Australia going?

I spoke earlier today about how we have reached the end of an era of great international information asymmetry.

This was an era in which a prosperous and all-successful West, through its powerful media organs, interpreted world affairs for everyone else on the planet.

Even when they were in disagreement, non-Western sources were still contesting Western narratives about the world.

The arrival of CCTV, Al Jazeera, and ZeeTV reflect a broader global power shift that is occurring, as societies' share of global wealth grow to reflect their share of world population.

These are more than marginal critical voices. They are backed by real resources and cultural self-confidence, are willing to borrow and experiment, and are riding a rising wave of consumer demand.

We are watching the arrival of hungry non-Western media players that base their appeal on their willingness to provide a different perspective.

The era we are entering is one of deeply contested interpretations, where the truth is complex and rival, and where the possibilities of narrowcasting allows beliefs to be pushed to the extremes of dogmatism.

The new media voices, particularly from closed and traditional societies, will increasingly contest and complicate the truth.

They portend Orwellian truth wars in the future as state media and free media engage in unresolvable disputes over what happened and who did it.

In this milieu, it is essential that Radio Australia remains strong, independently-minded and critical.

It is essential that Radio Australia continues as a mirror and a picture frame to Australian society and its true values, even as the changing power landscape around us forces us into difficult decisions and trade-offs.

We need to remember that the Australian publics' strong support for the ABC is as much about the excellence in what it does as it is about the quality of what it broadcasts.

The ABC's values must remain those values that lie at the heart of our society.

I've spent the day with the ABC International folks, and have come away convinced that this is the case.

Demographically they reflect a changing Australian society. But it's in their attitudes, commitments and passion that leave one with little doubt of the national importance of this institution.

The ABC and Radio Australia have become integral to our vision of ourselves as a nation.

That's why Mark Latham's suggestion last week that the ABC should be privatised would be met with a riot, and not only among Sauvignon Blanc swilling elites.

At the end of the day it shows that Mark Latham has not lost his unerring nose for public policy vote winners.

So I salute the achievements of Radio Australia and urge it on to the next 70 years.

It is a proud institution that has helped call a nation into being, and form its mental maps of the societies around it.

I thank you for including me in this important celebration.