Revisiting the 1965 Centenary of the International Telecommunication Union

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Abstract

The Journal republishes an historic paper from 1965 by Richard (Dick) Butler, later to become Secretary General (1983–1989) of the International Telecommunication Union, on the ITU and its influence on telecommunications standardisation in Australia during in its first century (1865–1965).

Introduction

The International Telegraph Union, the forerunner of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), was formed in 1865 in Paris by the representatives of twenty European countries, seeking to make international telegraphy interoperable, with common protocols for users and an agreed set of international tariffs. At this time telegraph services in Australia were run by individual colonies, with limited networks and no international connections. Mail services depended upon ships and horse-drawn coach lines, such as Cobb & Co. The telephone, of course, had yet to be invented. As Dick Butler wrote: "few communities [at that time] were more interested than Australia in the development of the means for speedy and reliable long-distance communication" (Butler, 1965 [5], p. 174)

The ITU's role is to promote and assist with the efficient utilisation and extension of the world telecommunication networks by encouraging the exchange of information and offering advice to solve telecommunication problems. The ITU is a shining example of international co-operation and the oldest inter-governmental organisation within the United Nations.

The ITU has always been a key international forum for standards setting and regulation. Perhaps its most important roles have been to ensure the technical interoperability of telecommunications services between ITU member (national) states, to allocate different parts of the global radio spectrum to different services, and to facilitate international co-operation in assigning satellite orbits. It also has a key role in providing expertise to improve telecommunication infrastructure in the developing world. The ITU's membership currently includes 193 countries and around 900 businesses, academic institutions, and international and regional organizations (ITU, 2023a [6]).

In 1878, South Australia was the first Australian colony to join the ITU, after Darwin was connected to the world via an under-sea cable to Java in 1871. This cable was interconnected to the famous Overland Telegraph Line from Darwin to Adelaide, providing access to and from the other Australian colonies. Upon Federation in 1901, the new Commonwealth of Australia joined the ITU, which became the International Telecommunication Union, embracing telephony as well as telegraphy and other future telecommunication services, from 1932.

The attached historic paper highlights a number of issues particular to Australia that were considered by the ITU in its first century. An overseas call from Australia to the United Kingdom, for example, would need to transit several networks owned by different operators and over several different time zones. The quality of the call was only as good as the weakest link; and here the ITU worked tirelessly to harmonise the standards and equitably share resources to optimise the efficiency of networks.

It is a credit to the ITU that the co-operation and harmonisation in telecommunications achieved over the last one hundred years has been attained by voluntary expert representation from all countries of the world and without resorting to coercion or conflict.

Australia in 1965 was still regarded as a relatively young and developing country, but twenty years later it commanded a pivotal position in the ITU, thanks to the tireless efforts of the author of this paper.

Richard (Dick) Butler served as the Secretary General of the ITU from 1983 to 1989 and was Deputy Secretary General from 1974 to 1982 (ITU, 2023b [7]). According to his obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald:*

[H]e was the highest ranking Australian in the United Nations hierarchy and the first and only Australian to be elected as head of a specialised agency in 1982. As the UN's regulator of the global airwaves, based in Geneva, he pushed for the introduction of accessible, reliable and compatible telephone, telegraphy and data transfer services in Third World countries (Butler & Hoven, 2012 [8]).

References

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