

Excerpts from *Behind the Scenes at SBS French Radio*

Danièle Kemp

in conversation with
Christophe Mallet and Jean-Noël Ducasse
introduced and chaired by Kerry Mullan¹

The Melbourne Salon

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Introduction by Kerry Mullan:

Have you ever wondered how things work at SBS French Radio? How many people are involved in the production of the program? Who are the presenters and how do they put the program together? How do they decide whom to interview? How did they come to work in radio?

Let us take you behind the scenes and introduce you to the people who have been bringing French Radio into our homes for almost three decades. Known to many of you already, Danièle Kemp joined SBS in 1986 to become Head of French, then Executive Producer of SBS French Radio until 2011, when she handed over to Christophe Mallet. Jean-Noël Ducasse also works with Christophe as a journalist on the show.

¹ 'Behind the Scenes at SBS French Radio' was presented in French, transcribed by Ivan Barko, translated by Danièle Kemp and Elaine Lewis.

This Melbourne Salon is a rare opportunity to hear Danièle Kemp talking about her life at SBS French Radio, her favourite (and least favourite) interviews, some of the most memorable and important people she has interviewed, the stressful and embarrassing moments behind the microphone and how she survived them. In conversation with Christophe and Jean-Noël, the team that is a crucial element of the French-speaking community in Melbourne (and Australia) will explain what goes on behind the scenes at SBS French radio and answer all of your questions.

Danièle Kemp came to Australia in 1960 where she attended MacRobertson Girls High School, before obtaining a number of tertiary qualifications. After a successful teaching career both in France (where she taught English) and in Australia (where she taught French), Danièle began working for the ABC and SBS. Since her retirement from SBS French Radio in 2011, she continued her association with the Australian Ballet School Board and the Australian Youth Orchestra Council for a number of years and was, at the time of this interview, Vice-President of French Assist Melbourne, an initiative of the Honorary French Consulate. She was recently elected Consular Councillor for the Asia-Pacific Region and has received the prestigious decorations of Officer of the French Order of Merit and Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour for her tireless contributions to the French-speaking community. She is married to former Senator Rod Kemp, Minister for the Arts and Sport in the Howard Government from 2001 to 2007.

Christophe Mallet arrived in Australia in 2005 from the UK, where he had lived since 1998. Christophe studied history at the University of Paris 13 and commerce in Britain. He created his own company, Business Intelligentsia, before following his real passion for journalism and joining SBS French Radio in 2009, where he has been Executive Producer since 2011. Christophe also covers the Tour de France and the Australian Open and became AFL Multicultural Ambassador in March 2014. At the time of the Salon, he was preparing to interview former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and the President of the French Republic, François Hollande, on the occasion of their visits to Australia.

Jean-Noël Ducasse has been in Australia since 1973 and was a broadcaster at Radio 3EA, the predecessor of SBS, from its beginnings in the mid-nineteen-seventies, before joining the newly created SBS in 1986.

He was previously involved in theatre at the University of Melbourne and at the Alliance Française de Melbourne, as well as teaching French and politics in Victorian secondary schools.



Kerry: While we are waiting for Danièle to write her memoirs, here is an opportunity to find out what happens in the *coulisses* of SBS radio, what they do and how they do it.

Danièle: We encountered many situations over the years: comical moments, failures, intense situations as well as tense ones, moments of conflict, but also defining moments when time was suspended and the exchange between us and our guests brought about changes of perceptions and new ideas. We had, over a period of twenty years, the good fortune to interview a great number of people who have made their mark in the world. What was it like, you may ask?

Technology was a constant challenge as it was continually changing and it meant that we were training on an ongoing basis, just to continue doing our programs. Thanks to the ever-expanding technology and the breakthrough of podcasts, we were able to reach a much wider public with every program and to receive immediate feedback from our listeners, which completely astonished the SBS management, who could not understand why we rated so well.

We had started with a definite disadvantage. The fashion at the time was to support ‘community languages’ rather than the academic languages taught in schools. French was taught in the Australian school curriculum, and was viewed as representing a ‘privileged minority’. We needed to prove the importance of the French broadcasts to francophones and students of the language. When we began the podcasts, and the ratings for French podcasts suddenly surpassed the Chinese, then it was obvious that something was going on.

In the early days at SBS we used to do a minimum of about four interviews per week and covered events happening in Melbourne and other cities around Australia, international conferences, arts events, scientific forums and international conferences in Australia. We did outside broadcasts in Melbourne and other cities—Perth, Adelaide—and featured major events there as well, such as Womad.

At the beginning, promotion at SBS always emphasised television, rather than radio, but in Melbourne we had a very close association with our television studios and, when celebrities came to our studios for an interview in the French language program, they also went to the television studios. Radio SBS has won medals in international competitions and, of course, social media has made Radio SBS more widely known.

We have been privileged to interview very interesting and often famous people and have recorded historic moments, politically important moments. For instance, during the Matignon Agreements (1988) which put an end to the unrest in New Caledonia, Michel Rocard, then Prime Minister of France, explained the New Caledonian situation.

Jean-Noël: When they redrew the schedule at SBS they had to find solutions which would satisfy everyone—there are 74 languages at SBS and they needed to find a method acceptable to all. The allocation of program hours was connected to the perceived calculations of the ‘language other than English’ spoken at home in answer to the question ‘which language do you speak at home’ in the Census questionnaires. One answer only may be given, whereas in some homes three languages are spoken—for example, I am married to a British woman, but English is not the only language spoken at home, as the census would have us believe.

We also receive listeners’ feedback through social media such as Facebook and Twitter which illustrates the extent of our audience—some listeners enjoy the cultural aspect of our podcasts even if they don’t themselves speak French and some of our listeners are also attracted by gastronomy.

Christophe: We have had 45,000 to 50,000 downloads of podcasts per month so these results spoke for themselves. Many people have contacted us after listening to the downloads and we have had feedback not only from listeners in Australia but also in the EU and Canada.

Danièle: There were difficult moments connected to the geo-political situation of the French nuclear tests in the Pacific and the reactions of certain political groups in Australia. The focus then was on France in the Pacific and the French were getting all the criticism, while Chinese ‘dirty’ nuclear tests, which took place a thousand kilometres closer to the Australian shores, were not even mentioned in the press. The SBS managing director at the time, Malcolm Long, was very firm and adamant that the French section at

SBS should not be held responsible for the French government's decision. The situation went completely quiet when a French Frigate, in a joint naval exercise with the Australian Navy, intercepted a Libyan ship in the territorial waters off Northern Australia.

The period of the Balkan Wars was also a challenge for the Balkan groups at SBS, who avoided contact with each other. We in the French department received a virulent letter during one of the Australian Open tournaments saying that we had used the word 'Yugoslav' in a sports report, rather than stating the precise nationality of each player. At some stage, as Yugoslavia was falling apart, a guard was employed to stand on duty at the entrance of the SBS building.

There were fun moments as well, when famous guests came to SBS. For example, when Hugh Jackman came to promote his film *Paperback Hero*, all the women at the station started coming from everywhere—the studios, the library and their little offices—to see and meet him. He made a huge impression on everyone with his courtesy and willingness to take time to meet people.

The same happened when André Rieu came for an interview. The women almost forced the door of the studio to see and speak to him! I literally had to lock the door of the studio to do the interview. The men at the station had their turn when Hollywood legend Leslie Caron came for an interview. The same thing occurred and, after the interview, it took her half an hour to free herself from her admirers.

Christophe: Of all the political personalities interviewed, Michel Rocard made the most lasting impression. Danièle interviewed him during the Matignon Agreements and I interviewed him twenty years later for the commemoration of the Franco-Australian Memorandum on Antarctica. Whatever one thought of his politics, he was an impressive person. What was scheduled to be a fifteen-minute interview turned into forty-five minutes and we could have continued for two hours. I had been told not to talk about the Matignon Agreements but he took the lead and spoke at length of errors made during the negotiations which had influenced outcomes.

Danièle: Yes there were some exceptional people and their ideas remain with you. When I interviewed Michel Rocard who was then Prime Minister, he explained the New Caledonian situation. A referendum was held which

demonstrated that a majority of New Caledonians had voted to stay with France, as part of the network of the French Overseas Territories, but a minority of Kanaks wanted independence. Michel Rocard found a solution, which was accepted by the rebel movement and the majority. The northern part of the island would be handed over to an autonomous native government, to learn about the political realities of self-government, while the rest of the country would be under a shared government rule.

Christophe: During the later interview with Michel Rocard, for the anniversary of the Antarctic Memorandum, we spoke of subjects for which I felt unprepared—it was easier to talk about New Caledonia than the Antarctic Memorandum. It will be interesting to follow New Caledonia's progress and the decisions made in 2018.

Danièle: Some encounters leave their mark on the interviewer and the interviewee and the exchange resonates long after. These are 'magic moments'.

Christophe: I wonder whether I will have a 'magic moment' with François Hollande when he comes. I won't talk about his popularity in France. I'll talk about French-Australian relations because he will be the first French president to visit Australia.²

On another note, in the short time I have been at SBS I have already produced 500 broadcasts. How many did you produce, Danièle?

Danièle: For twenty years I produced five broadcasts per week, including interviews. We began with basic technology—the technicians were always present and we had no means of preserving or archiving the work. Nowadays there are no technicians present.

Thinking of landmark interviews, the ANZAC Day celebrations were always important as we commemorated the special bond between Australia and France; the program often included exchanges with the residents of Villers-Bretonneux, Hammel and Pozières and we recorded events taking place in Australia and on the Western Front, in towns and villages.

² The first visit by a French president to Australia focussed on the shared memory of World War I. Mr Abbott and Mr Hollande planted an oak tree together at the War Memorial Park, in a mix of Australian soil and French soil that was dug out of the Australian War Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux.

There were visits between the *École Victoria* (Villers-Bretonneux) and Victorian schools and sometimes there were exchanges between the twin towns of Robinvale and Villers-Bretonneux. [...]

Christophe: We should explain how we make the programs, how much work is involved. It takes four hours to create a one-hour program—for a news broadcast of twelve minutes it takes three to four hours and you have to be ready to change everything at the last moment if some ‘breaking’ news comes in. We also have segments on cuisine as well as current news. The news broadcast is always direct transmission. [...]

For me SBS was a career change. Before joining SBS I worked in business, specialising in computer technology. It was a flexible job, without the strict deadlines you have in radio where it’s more difficult to estimate the outcomes of the work. The first year I was at SBS, the news section was all ready when we heard that a Polish government aircraft had crashed with the President and Prime Minister on board. I had to throw all my work into the rubbish bin and start re-writing. It’s more difficult at the weekend when you’re working alone. But it’s really interesting! When Bin Laden was killed, the news came through just before the news broadcast so we had to wait for confirmation and then re-write the show.

Danièle: Change is a constant factor in broadcasting, in the format, the approach to issues, the multitude of events, the constantly changing technology, the guest list, and the facilities available. It requires good health, endurance, curiosity, and the capacity to work quickly and under pressure.

Christophe: The Italian department at SBS broadcasts 144 hours per week for the Italian community. For the French department, the range of listeners is difficult to estimate, because our audience includes French, Belgian, Mauritian listeners as well as francophones from the Pacific region, students and teachers of the French language, not to mention those French listeners interested in French art, Belgian art, Aboriginal art...

There have been many changes since Danièle’s departure: interviews are now limited to seven minutes (previously they could take fifteen to twenty minutes). Sometimes we push the interview out to ten minutes. For example, tomorrow I’ll have François Hollande on air. Perhaps we’ll speak for three minutes, perhaps twenty-one. But I can’t tell him at the end of seven minutes that I’m not allowed to continue.

We don't have any problem filling the time allocated to us. The SBS newsroom produces features and reports. Other departments sometimes use these features, or segments of them, translating them into their own languages. We haven't used these features for some time; we have a huge volume of content so we don't need them any more—there's almost too much. It's up to the listeners to tell us what is interesting and now we are able to interact with our audiences on a daily basis. Our programs are now classified as 'Audio and Language Content', thus radio has become one of several SBS platforms.

Danièle: The length of an interview depends on the content. In Melbourne and other Australian cities we often have international conferences of all kinds—science, arts, business, technology... These go on all year round and we also have many festivals. It hasn't been difficult to find interviewees.

Christophe: Sometimes it's difficult to know what is happening outside the capital cities...

Danièle: That's one of the reasons we've worked with the Alliance Française groups throughout Australia; we've been able to interview their guests too.

Christophe: For about a year now we have divided the programs into themes—one theme each day, such as the latest African news, French news. We've also recently introduced music and culture as special themes...

Danièle: When I lived in Paris I listened religiously to Jacques Chancel's broadcasts on France Inter. He was very talented, an amazing presenter and interviewer, and he became my role model. He died in 2013. When he himself was interviewed he always described his approach to communication in these terms, 'I attempt to give the listeners not only what they should hear, but also what they want to hear'. Another way of saying 'I have great respect for my listeners'.

Christophe: Is there someone you have not yet interviewed but would like to interview?

Danièle: Yes, there is one and it is Nicolas Sarkozy. I regard him as an 'outsider'. He wasn't one of the happy few—he tries to think for himself. He comes from a Judeo-Christian background. If he had come to Australia I would have done anything to interview him, to ask him some big questions as I did with Rocard and Michel Onfray. They are all people with vision and we can learn from them. I regret not having interviewed Sarkozy.

Another huge regret was my interview with Liv Ulmann, when the machine didn't work! She came to Australia for the launch of a film she had directed. We talked about a lot of things—her career, Swedish cinema, Bergman... It was one of those magic moments and I felt ill for days when I discovered the machine hadn't recorded anything.

Jean-Noël: The stand-out interview for me was with Catherine Deneuve. I helped with her press conference in English for the opening night of *La Maman et la putain*. When I mentioned the 'mother hen' she said in English, 'I don't like that expression' and she looked cross with me. Then, the director of the Alliance Française organised for me to do an interview in French; she recognised me and answered all of my questions very pleasantly.

Christophe: An interview I have never forgotten was with Thierry Mariani.³ Not from a political point of view but because of the man himself. It was in a restaurant, close to midnight with the French Ambassador at the time, Michel Filhol, who was quite traditional and reserved and kept to protocols. It was a clash between two worlds when Thierry Mariani arrived—he was very 'cool'.

There was also Kevin McLeod, presenter of the TV program, Grand Designs. I prepared some questions for him in English but he speaks very good French and we did the interview in French. He wanted to see Federation Square so I took him for a tour. We discussed life-styles, his work, all in French.

I love Australian politics and would like to have interviewed John Howard—a pity he doesn't speak French.

Danièle: When I interviewed him for the fiftieth anniversary of ANZAC Day, John Howard told me this family story. At eighteen years of age his father enlisted as a volunteer for the First World War and fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Howard's grandfather enlisted two years later, at the age of forty. The son did not know that his own father had enlisted. They met quite by chance, outside a tavern in Bullecourt just before the final assault of the Australian troops, to break the German line.

³ Thierry Mariani is a French politician. He was 'Secretary of State for Transport' for the Minister of Ecology, Sustainable Development, Transport and Housing in the Third François Fillon government, and a member of The Republicans.

The line was broken and it was a point of no return for the German defence. Bullecourt was re-taken by the Australian troops and both father and son eventually returned together to Australia.

We made the ANZAC program at the Canberra War Memorial, in several sections. Staff at the War Memorial were very helpful in providing sources, lists of descendants and such, so I gave a copy of the broadcast to the War Memorial and also to one of my colleagues in Picardie who was making a similar kind of program in France. We also sent a copy to the Embassy and when John Howard was invited to France for an official visit, the French President, Jacques Chirac, welcomed him with these words, 'Welcome home, Prime Minister!'

I'll finish up with a funny story. Well-known chef, Gabriel Gaté is incapable of remaining serious—he laughs a lot and makes other people laugh. On this particular day he arrived at SBS to launch his book. I had reserved the studio for an hour. On arriving he asks the technicians, 'Well what are we going to do?' Hearing him in the corridor the Italian department comes out to see him, then the Spanish, then the Russians. They greet him and everyone embraces. He says nothing but the women all embrace him. So I say, 'OK, I'll have him for the first half hour and then you can sort it out amongst yourselves.' Then Gabriel turns towards them and says, 'This is the way a French man spends his afternoons—he starts with the Frenchwoman and then moves on to the others.' He's always like that, good fun. Always generous, very straight-forward and he takes an interest in people's health; he recently published a book about healthy eating. This earned him the admiration of the great chefs, in spite of them seeing it as an inferior cuisine.

Kerry: Thank you for sharing all these wonderful stories and memories with us, Danièle; we look forward to seeing them appear in written form, as part of your memoirs.