

Comment on SARL QSL Bureau Proposals

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This document was prepared in response to the undated statement "SARL QSL Bureau: Proposed Changes and New Procedures", published on the SARL Web site around May 2003. No closing date for comments was published.

Before compiling this response, I asked Francois Botha ZS6BUU for clarification on some points raised in the original statement. I include the responses to my questions below as appropriate.

General Comments

Perhaps this document should start with some general comments, before the specific response to the published proposal starts.

1. The Bureau serves a purpose

The QSL Bureau is a golden opportunity to project some international goodwill through amateur radio. As QSLing from South Africa has declined in recent years, I increasingly hear remarks that South Africa seems to have disappeared from the globe. Indeed, during a recent visit to California, two unsolicited remarks to this effect were heard, including one from a director of the world's biggest DX foundation.

In the past, the Bureau was regarded as an integral part of membership services. Indeed, local cards to non-members were shipped free of charge as a service to the member. These days, the Bureau appears to be regarded as if it is not a part of amateur radio.

A Bureau serves another important purpose. It allows QSL managers, who are a breed of suckers that offer their time freely to relieve the paperwork burden so that a DX station can spend more time on the air, the ability to distribute cards on that station's behalf. Perhaps one could argue that resident operators have an interest in sending cards, because they are hoping for a reply. However, QSL managers send bureau cards only because they are providing a service for the common good. A typical DX station might make tens of thousands of contacts annually, and several thousand different operators might need the QSL card for some or other award. A QSL manager provides this service, and a Bureau enables him or her to provide this service without having to foot the bill, too. If the manager provides all the time and labour freely, is it unreasonable to expect the ham population at large to fund the expenses? I believe not.

2. The proposals are not in the interests of an efficient Bureau

Individuals involved in running the bureau are not themselves active users of the bureau. I base this statement on several years of helping to sort Bureau cards. In an effort to find something more tangible, I looked at my collection of over 1000 QSL cards from over 500 different ZS stations. The collection includes exactly three from bureau personnel, confirming my initial impression.

Ever since the bureau was moved to Johannesburg, repeated offers, both verbal and in writing, to assist with the running of the bureau and with information have been turned down. The two previous bureau managers have not been consulted at all either. The current staff had to feel their way on subjects as basic as how to use the postal tariff tables without being ripped off by postal agents, yet offers of assistance were turned down. Does it make sense to try to re-invent the wheel without any domain knowledge, when the necessary knowledge is freely available? Perhaps it does, but if so, the logic escapes me.

Perhaps, if there was some participation by active users of the Bureau in drafting these proposals, there would have been less glaring inconsistencies to comment on.

3. The League's own policy on membership services

The entire proposal is at odds with the League's own stated position that members cannot pick and choose how they contribute to different elements of membership. In my case, I have no interest in VHF repeaters, *RadioZS* holds no attraction for me, and I do not see any value in being represented at ICASA by the League. Indeed, there is considerable animosity against the League within ICASA, and in many cases with good reason. I have no use for the regular Council meetings, as anyone who runs a business would concede that Council's business could be handled far more efficiently through email and teleconferences than through free cross-country excursions. However, it is expected of me to contribute to those activities through my subscription.

Given that DXing is the single most popular activity among League members, as confirmed by the results of a survey published on the SARL Web site some three years ago, it strikes me as strange that the League suddenly insists that the QSL Bureau must be financially self-sufficient. Why, suddenly, does this one aspect of the League's operations have to be handled differently, when the President himself has repeatedly gone on record as opposing what he calls the "Cafeteria" system? Why should members not fund the QSL bureau equally, yet minority activities such as Council travel and repeaters continue to be funded by subscriptions?

A further expansion of the Cafeteria system is proposed in paragraph 5. Again, how can this proposal be justified in the light of Council's public viewpoint?

Perhaps the answer lies in the statements that have recently been made by Council members, regarding the so-called "abuse" of the bureau by a few individuals. The theory they propose is that some individuals are receiving huge contributions with QSL requests through the mail, and then responding to those requests through the bureau.

If so, some exposure to the real world of DXing might be fortuitous. The majority of serious QSLers use databases that list various QSL managers' QSL morality. A buck-grabber of the ilk of FR5DX quickly gets blacklisted, and will definitely not be able to continue the scam for any length of time. In addition, no buck-grabber will gain any support from the DX foundations, whose support is essential in making the average DXpedition happen. DXpeditions do not make money, and neither does QSLing in the hands of someone who honours bureau requests.

Or perhaps there is an even easier solution. Perhaps these Council members should simply check the percentage of outgoing cards that state “Please QSL”, rather than “Thanks QSL”. The answers might surprise them.

4. Is this timing sensible?

Anyone who has been following trends in QSLing internationally will understand that bulk QSLing is bound to reduce in years to come. As electronic QSLing matures, most of the routine stuff is likely to be done through electronic means, and most large-scale operations might confine themselves to a single QSL card per station, while multiple band-modes are confirmed via the Internet and initiatives such as the ARRL’s Logbook of the World. Does it then make sense to alienate the membership by imposing draconian measures on the QSL bureau? It certainly doesn’t seem so.

Comment 1: Retroactive Applicability

The proposal states: “...*the procedures... will also cover cards still in our possession from the current financial year*”.

It goes without saying that this suggestion is unacceptable. On the one hand, no official decision has been taken by the League’s Council, and no notification has been sent to Council. Indeed, no deadline for comments has even been announced, which presumably indicates that no Council decision can take place in the near future.

The League has not dispatched outgoing cards for over six months. Even if a decision is taken and announced, these measures cannot apply to cards that were delivered under the assumption that they would be dispatched as a membership benefit.

Fortunately, the budget available for the Bureau in this financial year is adequate to ship the cards. If new rules are invented, they need not apply retroactively, as the funds to ship the existing cards are already available.

Comment 2: The Myth of the 500 Cards

An arbitrary limit of 500 cards or 1 kg has been placed on each member’s DX and local cards.

The local quota is meaningless, as it is unlikely that any single member has ever sent 500 cards locally in a single year. When I asked for examples to the contrary, I was told that it has happened, but no examples were provided. The local quota is simply window-dressing, and holds no real benefit for anyone. I remain open to be corrected, should the SARL produce real evidence in this regard. However, I doubt if I need to hold my breath.

As for the DX quota: Again, the quota is more window-dressing than substance. Using the IARU standard (90 x 160 mm, 175 to 250 gsm), a QSL card weighs between 2,7 and 3,8 g, allowing 200 mg for a label and the ink. Consequently, 500 copies of an IARU-compliant card simply cannot fit into the 1 kg mass allowance. Instead, members will only be able to send between 264 and 369 cards p.a., or between 26 and 47% less than the apparent promise of 500 cards.

Whether this discrepancy is due to deliberate misrepresentation or simple ignorance is a matter of conjecture among the membership.

Comment 3: Members Only

Under the heading *Non-Member Cards*, there is a statement:

“The rule of thumb regarding QSL Bureau’s (sic) is quite simple. Any Bureau will sort and despatch (sic) cards for any paid-up member locally and internationally. However, Bureau’s (sic) do not cater for non-members in any country.”

I asked what this assertion had been based on, and was answered: *“This is based on the number of cards returned to us from Bureau’s around the world marked “not a member” or “ call sign unknown” or “ does not want to receive cards”. We have not ideas what the IARU’s feelings are on this point.”*

Neither “callsign unknown” nor “does not want to receive cards” strikes me as being evidence to support the rather broad statement under discussion. The former is indicative of bad logging, while the latter is more likely to have come from a member, as non-members are less likely to have communicated their preferences to the bureau.

Indeed, IARU policy requires member societies to maintain a bureau for members, and recommends that the service also be made available to non-members at cost! To illustrate the fallacy of the statement that bureaux do not cater for non-members in any country, the reader need only read the guidelines for the ARRL’s incoming bureau system, which is available on their Web site (www.arrl.org). In these guidelines, non-members are clearly eligible for participation on the same basis as members are.

Perhaps, if the League is so keen to recover the costs from users, the time has come to implement the IARU recommendation and make the service available equally to non-members?

Comment 4: Locals Only

Under *Multiple Call Signs (sic)*, it is stated that *“if any of those call signs (sic) are foreign call signs (sic), proof of Membership of that Bureau should be supplied”*.

In response to my query about what the reason could possibly be, and how the foreign bureau was suddenly involved, I was told:

“For the very same reason why we will not send out cards from people who are not members of our League. It applies all over, no cards are sent out (see 5 earlier) if the sender (call sign) is not a legitimate member call sign. That is a “freeby” which we cannot afford.”

I fail to understand the logic. I am a member of the League. I live in this country. As my ZS6 callsign is only valid in this country, it follows that I have to have other callsigns for all the countries I operate from. When I return home, I send cards through the SARL, as that is the national society that I belong to. Why should I have to join societies in every country that I operate from?

Anyone who uses the bureau regularly will know that dozens of Germans, Brits, Americans and Japanese go on regular DXpeditions, and send QSL cards for exotic callsigns through their home bureaux. It is common practice, and no-one has ever asked these operators to join a bureau in every country they operate from. I can only imagine what an intrepid DXpeditioner's response would be if he was suddenly asked to maintain membership of a dozen national societies on an ongoing basis.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that a callsign is simply something that identifies a radio station. It no more describes a person than the number plate of the car that the person drives does. The analogy might even go further: If a person drives rental cars in various countries, does that person suddenly need several new passports?

In no country in the world does a bureau refuse to process cards from members' foreign callsigns. I challenge Council to come up with one substantial counter-example.

Comment 5: Is the Bureau part of Amateur Radio?

Under *Conclusion*, the purpose is stated as being to "*alleviate the unnecessary financial burden placed on the SARL for running the QSL bureau*".

In whose opinion is the expense unnecessary?

Given that DXing is a major activity of a large number of League members, and that Council has repeatedly stated that members are not free to choose which activities they will financially support and which they will not, I would contend that the expense is not unnecessary. Indeed, the mere fact that so much energy is being expended on trying to get rid of an expense that provides a general benefit to members in exchange for a mere 5% of the total budget is neither justifiable nor necessary.

Let's focus on the important stuff. Trying to demonise a popular activity that constitutes one-twentieth of the budget will not get the SARL back on track. It will not attract members and will not substantially cut expenditure. On the other hand, spending our energies more wisely on offering real benefits (including the QSL bureau) might.