

Promise Deferred

KEITH MACKRIELL

IN 1941, after the fall of France, the Francophile British writer Charles Morgan gave a lecture in London about Anglo-French relations. The Brits, he said, should get rid of the almost universal belief that 'you can never trust a Froggy'. He urged the French to abandon 'Perfide Albion'—their translation of the British belief. Making his case, Morgan used an image that has resonated across the years—'*France, he said, 'is an idea necessary to civilisation'.*

ABC Radio is the same. For all my remembered life it has been there—as informer, entertainer and comforter, mentor and stimulator. Bringer of news, good and bad. Of insights never before imagined. And the sublime sounds of Mozart, Callas and the FA Cup.

Where else, in a six-day period, is there an informed half-hour of talk about contemporary issues in Health, the Law, Religion, the Media, Sport and—however belatedly—Business? And all before nine in the morning. Where else are life matters—the whole gamut—given a run before 10? And it's only on ABC Radio National that you can spend an hour a day listening to talk about the arts.

That's the good news. There is, sadly, some not so good news—that overshadows much that is admirable about ABC Radio and serves to weaken the foundations of tax-funded broadcasting.

THREE PRINCIPLES— IN THEORY ...

Before examining the bad news, there are three elements that should be clear:

First: Broadcasting paid for *by all taxpayers* should deal impartially and fairly *with us all*.

Second: The precept of '*due impartiality*' should be defined, be definitive, be in the Code of Practice and be *put* into practice.

Third: All program-making decisions should be based on '*integrity of intent*' by each of the people making and taking those decisions. This means that they should be based on the professional assessment of program values and standards, with personal preferences, prejudices and predilections pushed into the background.

The ABC's latest Annual Report refers to a Performance Study claiming that, among those who used the ABC (television, radio or online) as a source of news and current affairs

Broadcasting paid for by all taxpayers should deal impartially and fairly with us all

on most days, *90 per cent of respondents* thought that the ABC was 'doing a good job of being balanced and even-handed when reporting news and current affairs'.

The difficulty with that figure is not just that it seems counter-intuitive, but that readers are not told who asked what, of whom—when, where, and in what context—nor who carried out the study, or who paid for it.

What does it mean to argue that 'due impartiality' should be at the heart of program-makers' decisions? There are three key points:

First—that public service broadcasters aren't being properly professional if only one view is reflected in their programs. They must include the widest reasonable range of views. Plurality should be the guide.

Second—due impartiality should mean that, while program makers take account of a range of views on an issue, they should also consider the number and weight of opinion holding minority views.

Third—while it is entirely *proper* that accepted orthodoxies should be challenged, it is entirely *improper not* to do justice to the established view, fully and clearly, and also *not* to discuss the *downside implications* of the alternatives to those orthodoxies.

Now for '*integrity of intent*'—that other element that seems so important for public service broadcasters.

The following story, told from real life, by an ABC radio supervisor, illustrates what integrity of intent is *not*.

A program-maker in the Religious Department made a program. Asked to comment, the supervisor said—'That's good stuff you have there—interesting clerics, views about social matters, and political matters as well. I'm happy with all that. But, they are all speakers from left-of-centre, aren't they? We need to include some from the right, or conservative, or whatever you like to call them.'

To which the program-maker said—'there aren't any'.

'Um', said the supervisor, 'but I'm quite sure there are.'

'I mean,' said the program-maker, in a kindly way, 'none worth listening to!'

What this shows is that the program-maker's opposition to people with views for which he had no time was used as a reason for denying his audience access to alternative views.

The listening public has the right to know—and professional, publicly-funded broadcasters have the responsibility to present—not just the views that match those of the program makers, but those that don't. Oliver Wendell Holmes talked about the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought we hate.

There is a special need for news and current affairs people to apply integrity to their intent because they act as 'gatekeepers'. They have the power to select and present the material that comes to them from multiple sources. Their values and assumptions define the nature of news itself. They make choices, based on their assessments of news values. These values are not clear-cut—except at times such as the Princess of Wales' death and other news events of over-arching significance. On days like that, news may well be fully dictated by the event.

But who can doubt that, on most days, journalists and current affairs people *do* make choices about *which* stories are to be covered, *who* will be asked to comment—and *how* the events will be presented?

In the process of deciding, they will, of course, be influenced by their own viewpoints, by their professional experience and by the assumptions of their profession. Perhaps, most of all, they'll be influenced by the 'culture' of their organization.

Within that culture, people often have to work hard to retain their integrity of intention. It's not easy. But the public is entitled to expect that it should be applied, as part of the integrity/independence couplet—a linkage which means that, where

impartiality and integrity are accepted and applied, independence, both financial and editorial, should be guaranteed.

...AND IN PRACTICE

And there the story might end.

It doesn't, because due impartiality is not always reflected in Radio National broadcasts. And because there seems a lack of integrity of intent in some of the network's output.

The listening public has the right to know ... not just the views that match those of the program makers, but those that don't

What's the evidence?

Well, regrettably, it's got to start with Phillip Adams.

Regrettably, because the problem lies as much with those who are nominally in charge, and who seem to accept the lack of due impartiality, as with Phillip Adams himself.

The Weekend Australian of 10-11 March 2001 published Phillip Adams' own defence of his position in relation to Radio National, making it possible to examine the perspective of a high-profile contributor to the network.

The first and fair thing to note is that he claims to have urged Radio National's management 'over the years, to offer the likes of Gerard Henderson or Paddy McGuinness their own programs'—though he's not so keen about Imre Salusinszky, who would, he says, 'over-balance me'.

But at least his support for Dr Henderson and Mr McGuinness points to his recognition that the public's right to know extends beyond their right to know only what Phillip Adams wants them to know.

He went on to say that, had his critics asked him, he 'could have identified any number of ABC presenters whose political, social or cultural views are not merely conservative but energetically reactionary'. Disappointingly, he doesn't name those people, contenting himself with the assertion that, in Melbourne, there's a broadcaster whose views on many issues would accord with Alan Jones', while in Newcastle there's a presenter who treated Pauline Hanson with 'a mixture of giggles, gush and grovelling'.

Phillip Adams went on to claim that, 'of the four hours of wireless I present each week for Radio National, only 15 minutes is devoted to Federal politics—the "Canberra Babylon" spot being traditionally presented by a distinguished member of the press gallery. Currently this task falls to Margo Kingston—who is,' he says, 'as likely to excoriate the Labs as she is the Libs'.

Three points should be made here:

First—it is not the case that Phillip Adams is heard for just four hours a week. In fact, he is currently allocated eight hours of Radio National air time a week, not four. He has the 4.00pm to 5.00pm slot on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and the 10.00pm to 11.00pm slot Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The afternoon sessions—to be sure—are recorded versions of the previous night's program, but he has this double whammy, giving him a total time not matched by any other ABC public affairs commentator.

Next—it is more than just a little disingenuous to say, as he does, that only 15 minutes each four hours is devoted to Federal politics. Anyone listening regularly is

soon aware that it isn't just in segments about Federal politics that his political position comes through. Tone, taste, inference, implication—they're all there to pump up the left and flatten the others, in a range of items.

As to the assertion that in Margo Kingston's 'Canberra Babylon' slot she is as likely to excoriate the Labs as the Libs—if that's so, she doesn't seem to do it very often. And not even her detractors would accuse Margo Kingston of setting out to disguise her general antipathy towards the present Federal Government.

Phillip Adams goes on to say that 'we've a regular in Bea Campbell, who spends much of her allotted time expressing contempt for Tony Blair and his New Labour henchmen'. So, sometimes, she may. But don't run away with the idea that she fills in the rest of her time boosting the Conservatives. Not even *her* nearest enemies would say that Bea Campbell has a thing going for William Hague. Tony may get the sharp edge of her tongue occasionally, but it's the full rolling-pin job for poor William.

Phillip Adams admits that 'we've given air time to Noam Chomsky' but says that this is balanced by 'respectful hearings to the likes of Henry Kissinger'. And, says Phillip, Noam 'gets very shirty if you call him left-wing'.

Well, if Chomsky hadn't written *Detering Democracy, Chronicles of Dissent* and a number of other books reflecting politically radical positions, over many years, he could have avoided the 'left-wing' tag that Mr Adams says causes him to become shirty. *Finally*—in his defence of his place on Radio National, Phillip Adams examines the 'so-called ABC culture'. It is, he says, 'a fantasy'. 'A furphy.'

Curious point, this. He seems to be saying that because ABC Radio has different staff working on different

programs, on different networks, there isn't an ABC Culture—it's an argument that flies in the face of evidence from literally hundreds of organizations, of all kinds.

PROMISE DEFERRED

In one sense, Phillip Adams has acknowledged the wide concern that his eight hours of air time, broadly devoted to left-wing perspectives, skews the network.

As he first wrote in *The Australian* and then told Mick O'Regan on Radio National's Media Report on the first day of March 2001, 'On this very day I've applied for membership of the Young Libs, Old Libs, the Nats, One Nation, the Shooters Party and, the most extreme of all, the right-wing faction of the New South Wales ALP. I am,' he said, 'a new person, and everyone can now relax, now that the extremist Adams is like the thylacine—extinct, and

Concerns about Radio National's commitment to due impartiality and integrity of intent don't begin and end with Phillip Adams

the ABC has clearly established its ecological equilibrium'.

You might have thought, having been told this, that everything was going to be all right. But then, a few days afterwards, Phillip was talking to John Pilger on *Late Night Live*. And it was soon clear that all his applications for membership must have been blackballed. All that bright promise of change has been deferred. Nothing much is different.

Of course, concerns about Radio National's commitment to due impartiality and integrity of intent don't begin and end with Phillip Adams, nor are they a recent development.

As long ago as December 1996, Eva Cox, who has had regular access to the network, said, 'There's a perception that left-wing people like me get too much airtime. I can tell you they don't. The place is full of what I'd call right-wing commentators. And we have got 50 million right-wing commentators everywhere else in the media'.

Notice that she uses the same approach as Phillip Adams—claiming that there are right-wing commentators on the ABC, but then avoids naming them. And they both justify a left-wing stance, by asserting, to use Phillip Adams' elegant phrase, that 'it's a fart in a windstorm compared to the overwhelming bombast and bigotry that's pouring out of commercial radio'. The implication that 'our' ABC exists as a left-wing bastion against commercial bombast and bigotry is not easy to find in the Corporation's Charter, Mission Statement, Code of Practice or any other guideline document.

Some commentators argue that listing examples of the absence of impartiality is an unnecessary waste of time. Frank Devine, in *The Australian* of 12 August 1996, said that 'unfairness is endemic—why bother making lists of instances, when bias permeates the national broadcaster, and the evidence is there for everybody to see and hear every day?'

Perhaps he's right. But if the perception of a lack of impartiality is allowed to continue, then the antipathy this causes between the ABC, the present Government and sections of the audience, will fester.

OBSTACLES TO REFORM

This conflict does little good to anyone—and it is surely against the public interest that there should be longstanding antipathy between a national broadcaster and any govern-

ment, Federal or State, Coalition or Labor.

Which prompts consideration of what stands in the way of improvement from the ABC side.

There seem to be two principal possibilities:

The *first* is that the ABC's Board, management and senior Radio executives simply don't see the problem. If this is so, and they are not to be shifted from that view, then redress will be a long time coming.

The *second* possibility is that the Board, management, and senior Radio executives decide that they *can't* take action, despite the conviction that action is justified.

This possibility is based on the opinion, articulated by the former Senator Graham Richardson, that the ABC news and current affairs staffs 'simply won't cop' certain changes they don't like.

Recent months have illustrated how effectively a campaign through the media can be mounted against a Managing Director, who now joins other chief executive officers, including Geoffrey Whitehead and David Hill, whose policies have run foul of the prevailing opinions of those staff who see themselves as holding the flame for the ABC.

If, indeed, the influence of staff opinion leads to reluctance to intervene, then the views of Russell Bate, the last Labor appointee to the current Board, become clearer.

Earlier this year he spoke about staff attitudes and the resistance to management directions. Mr Bate's view, after five years on the Board, is that there is an unrealistic expectation by many staff of involvement in management. A half-billion dollar operation, he said, can't be run like a collective farm.

Well, Russell Bate has articulated what many people have long suspected—that a core of influential staff, while not actually managing the ABC, has for long had the nega-

tive power to block certain decisions and policies and people.

Last year, when there were rumours that Phillip Adams' contract was not to be renewed, provides a case study.

Aided by media mates and the strident Friends of the ABC, Phillip Adams became a symbol of staff influence. There was a significant public furore, and denials from Radio management.

A core of influential staff, while not actually managing the ABC, has for long had the negative power to block certain decisions and policies and people

The issue, at least in public, was killed off, with a *Sydney Morning Herald* report quoting Mr Adams as saying 'I run a good program. I'm not going to take the execution'.

A CLEAR-CUT EXAMPLE

A final point. The Breakfast session on Radio National on Friday 30 March 2001 ran commentary about the decision by President Bush to withdraw American support for the Kyoto environmental agreement.

The broadcast segment had two people commenting on that decision—a British professor and a former member of the Clinton administration. Both took the same position, opposing the Bush decision.

This failed the many listeners who want to be able to make informed judgments—either informed assent or informed dissent—on a wide range of current issues.

What we got were two people taking essentially the same position. There is not the slightest objection to presenting views in opposition to those taken by any government. But listeners have the right to know—and the ABC has the responsibility to provide—information and comment from people who represent the principal differing views—on the Kyoto decision or any other comparable issue.

The program segment provided no reason or background for the Bush decision. Radio National apparently thought it was right, with time in the slot for two opinions, to have both commentators taking the same anti-Bush position.

It was later claimed by a Radio National spokeswoman—as reported in *The Australian* of Monday 2 April 2001—that 'the program's producer tried to contact pro-Bush commentators but none was available for the broadcast'. It was also said that 'Breakfast will continue covering that story this week, and all points of view will be presented'.

It is left to readers and listeners to decide whether the claim that no pro-Bush commentators were available is credible. In making up their minds, they should note that, in her breakfast show on ABC Radio 702, in Sydney, Sally Loane interviewed two commentators—one, a US Government greenhouse adviser, who was wholly in agreement with Bush's decision. This was broadcast only minutes after the Radio National producer couldn't find a single commentator in the English-speaking world available to put the pro-Bush view.

Did Radio National treat this major story with due impartiality—and was there integrity of intent?

Keith Mackriell was the Federal Head of ABC Radio from 1974 to 1984. This is an edited version of a paper he delivered to the IPA's ABC Conference in Sydney on 31 March 2001. A full list of Conference speakers and their papers are available on the IPA Website: www.ipa.org.au

IPA