

H.R. NICHOLLS SOCIETY

*Reforming Australia's
Industrial Relations*

XXIST CONFERENCE

*'Beating the Bush Blues:
Creating Jobs in
Country Australia'*

**Keynote Address:
The Hon Tim Fischer, MP**

Commercial Club (Albury) Ltd,
Dean St, Albury NSW 2640

Friday 5 May &
Saturday 6 May 2000

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The Aims of the H.R. Nicholls Society

- To promote discussion about the operation of industrial relations in Australia including the system of determining wages and other conditions of employment.
- To promote the rule of law with respect to employers and employee organisations alike.
- To promote reform of the current wage-fixing system.
- To support the necessity for labour relations to be conducted in such a way as to promote economic development in Australia.

A Viewer's Complaint

PETER PRIEST

DAVID Bowman's article 'In praise of the ABC' in the February 2000 issue of *The Adelaide Review* has prompted the following observations. The thrust of his article appeared to be that the ABC is independent, not biased and should not be restricted financially or otherwise by the Coalition Government.

I hold an alternative view regarding criticisms of the ABC, as it seems that only those who have the appropriate sympathies, or have become so used to behaviour, or who only watch or listen to the ABC and/or read like-minded newspapers, would consider the ABC to be balanced. In my opinion, the ABC is so imbued with the Labor viewpoint, and has been so for many years, that many apparently fail to notice it.

The ABC should take note that, in the 'Cash for Comments' affair, the Australian Broadcasting Authority made a statement about 'the importance of Broadcasting and that it must be fair and balanced'. The ABC should be monitored by the Australian Broadcasting Authority to ensure that any favours and support by the ABC for the Labor Party are dealt with so that its broadcasting is indeed 'fair and balanced'.

Mr Bowman went back to 1970, mentioning the Liberal Gorton Government and its proposal to reduce funding to the ABC. Richard Alston was also mentioned for 'massive funding cuts' and for 'hounding the ABC', in recent times. Mr Bowman did not mention, however, that when Labor's Bob Hawke came to government in 1983, he sacked Dame Leonie Kramer and her entire ABC Board. Imagine the furor if the Coalition tried to do something like that.

Before detailing some of the ABC's activities in recent weeks, it is worth looking at some of the ABC's past history. It did its very best to crucify John Hewson over his attempt to bring in the GST, and also Alexander Downer over a minor bumble he made at a remote

Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. At least Mr Downer made the effort to visit there as the Liberal Opposition Leader—I have not heard of any senior Labor figure visiting this remote community to that time, or since.

Similarly, the ABC only presented one side of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge saga: it ignored the disadvantaged dissident Aboriginal women whose information was supported by the subsequent Royal Commission. Where is the balance here?

Surely the ABC's duty is to provide both sides of the story, particularly as it is taxpayer-funded by people from all sides of politics. If it cannot do this, steps should be taken to ensure that it does.

Why is it that, for years, the *7:30 Report* has had two people with Labor backgrounds (Kerry O'Brien and Barrie Cassidy) regularly on the programme, particularly when it is obvious that they find it difficult to hide their dislike of Coalition people? Why not one with a Coalition background who could serve at least equally as well as Kerry or Barrie, so that there is a person from each side of politics to provide the balance which is lacking in the *7:30 Report*?

Moving to recent weeks, the following activities in the ABC TV news and the *7:30 Report* seem noteworthy.

On 7 January 2000, Maxine McKew interviewed Labor's Bob McMullan and Liberal's Tony Abbott regarding the Church-based employment agencies. There was no hard evidence produced to support Labor's claims that non-Christians were being discriminated against. Maxine kept interrupting and talking over the top of Tony Abbott, so that he was not able to present his side of the story.

Some of the points relevant to this interview and which Mr Abbott subsequently made in his article titled 'True Believers need not apply' in the February 2000 issue of *The Adelaide Review* are:

- Church-based agencies have been delivering government-funded em-

- performance at putting job-seekers into work was the chief factor in assessing job-network tenders
- If Church agencies' employment practices were acceptable under the former Labor Government it is hard to see how identical practices can be unacceptable now.
- Kim Beazley wants to discriminate against high-performing Church agencies in favour of a low performing government agency.

Labor's attacks, supported by the ABC—who should be impartial—constitute an assault on what has been settled Australian practice at least since the time when Liberal Bob Menzies began state aid to Catholic schools in the mid-1960s.

Historically, Church agencies have received government funds because they have been good at their job. Surely the role of the ABC is to ensure that the public is fully informed and not just fed the Labor line?

In the *7:30 Report* on 4 February 2000, Kerry O'Brien interviewed Coalition Senator John Tierney regarding the entitlements of the textile workers in the Hunter Valley who had lost their jobs. Kerry didn't want to know that Labor had done nothing about the problem of workers losing their entitlements during Labor's 13 years in government, or that what the Coalition Government was doing to help the workers was unprecedented. Instead Kerry said, 'Why has it taken so long?'

It is interesting to note the completely different attitude adopted by Kerry over the long-running Yallourn power dispute in an interview with Steve Bracks on 7 February 2000. Kerry introduced the programme with the words 'Victoria's Labor Government wins in its showdown with unions over a crippling power dispute' and followed that up by saying 'for the first time in recent memory a State government has invoked its emergency powers to guarantee the supply of electricity'.

This was the complete opposite to the approach to Senator Tierney and the Coalition's efforts regarding the National Textiles workers as detailed above.

Also, on the TV News, when John Howard met with the National Textiles workers, the ABC applied its usual sarcasm and denigration towards the Coalition, Geoff Sims saying sarcastically that the Prime Minister flew in and the textile workers came by bus. Video of the PM's plane and a bus were shown to

emphasize this message. If it had been Kim Beazley going to meet the workers I am confident that Geoff Sims would have been rather more positive.

Tim Lester, of the *7:30 Report*, was very supercilious and sarcastic and showed no indication of that basic respect to which everyone is entitled, when interviewing Tony Abbott on 9 February 2000, regarding Employment National, and when giving a report on John Howard, the Government and the National Textiles affair on 10 February 2000. Such behaviour does nothing to improve the image of the ABC.

In the *7:30 Report* on 28 January 2000, Alan Kohler made the statement, 'the Reserve is worried about the GST, it thinks Australia should not be putting

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up prices by 10 per cent'. Alan Kohler, and any other person who wants to know, understands that when the GST is in place, the currently hidden wholesale sales tax will be abolished. Many prices will be reduced and others will not go up by 10 per cent. Alan Kohler should have explained this, and not misled the public into thinking that everything will go up by 10 per cent—again the Labor line.

The ABC makes a practice of identifying anyone who may have conservative or Coalition leanings such as Piers Ackerman, David Barnett, Donald McDonald or Michael Kroger. The ABC also has clear 'targets', such as Ray Martin, who they hound at every opportunity, the last unacceptable occasion I saw being on *Media Watch* on 7 February 2000. Progressive or Labor-leaning people do not get similarly identified. Why the tag for those who have or who

are considered might have conservative or Coalition tendencies?

While genuinely funny pieces are welcome, the so-called skits by John Clarke and Brian Dawe against the Coalition, on Fridays on the *7:30 Report*, are disgraceful and quite unfunny. These men and the ABC are hiding behind the guise of satire in their continuing efforts to denigrate John Howard and the Coalition. If they should ever satirize Labor, I have no doubt that Labor would be treated without the same degree of denigration.

The recent survey by Newspoll and commissioned by the ABC ('Johns warns: people on Aunty's side', *The Australian*, 27 January 2000) is surely very misleading. The survey included people who do not watch or listen to the ABC: so how can they possibly offer a legitimate viewpoint on something they do not watch or listen to?

Alternatively, if you take the ratings into account, only, say, eight per cent to 15 per cent of the population watch or listen to the ABC. The reported Newspoll findings do not differentiate between those who watch or listen to the ABC and those who do not. What is the point of taking such a survey unless it reflects the actual situation so that it will not mislead people?

As an example of the ABC's audience, David Dale in his article 'ABC muscles in on bullies' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 2000) states that on Monday, 7 February 2000, 'The Vicar of Dibley' got 1.45 million (viewers) an amazing figure for any ABC show'. Even at its very best, this equals only 8 per cent of Australia's population. And this, and other programmes, not only cost taxpayers \$500 million, but we are not getting the 'fair and balanced coverage' that the Australian Broadcasting Authority considers broadcasters should provide.

Finally, unless the ABC can present fair and balanced coverage of the political scene, then the \$500 million of funds spent annually on the ABC may be better, and more equitably, spent on health, education and other community needs including, say, workers in similar situations to those from National Textiles.

In short, non-Labor taxpayers need to be assured by the Australian Broadcasting Authority that they are not just supporting the Labor Party through the ABC.

Peter Priest is a retired bank manager.

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