

The ABC's Paralysis on Bias

Christian Kerr

When the Titanic hit the iceberg, the directors of the White Star Line no doubt had some thinking to do.

What is Australian Broadcasting Corporation management doing now that their flagship television current affairs program, *Four Corners*, has been holed below the waterline—twice? Ticky Fullerton's examination of the Tasmanian forest industry, 'Lords of the Forest', screened on 16 February last year, has been the subject of negative findings by both the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the ABC's own Independent Complaints Review Panel.

The day after the broadcast, ABC Local Radio Tasmania's morning host Tim Cox told his listeners that there had never been a bigger response to a *Four Corners* story—and that the majority of callers believed that the program was biased in favour of the Green movement. The 'Lords of the Forest' was just one of three controversial reports by Fullerton on environmental subjects.

'Sold Down the River', a look 'at the winners and losers from a radical experiment in trading precious water rights', according to the *Four Corners* Website, and 'The Waste Club', an examination of 'how one of the country's most powerful lobbies has ruthlessly repelled moves to solve Australia's growing waste crisis', had already generated heated debate when they were broadcast the previous year.

Four Corners describes itself as 'Investigative TV journalism at its best'.

In the days following 'Lords of the Forest', many groups and individuals had a different view. These did not just include the obvious logging interests. Dissident Liberal turned Australian Democrat, Greg Barns, a one-time

adviser to the Tasmanian State government who knows the forest issue, described Fullerton's work as 'self-indulgent polemic and nothing more'. The Timber Communities Australia organisation announced it would lodge a formal complaint with the ABC.

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Before TCA could act, however, the ABC's judgement was already under question. The *Crikey.com* Website reported on February 23:

Already there are reports that ABC watchers are pouring [sic] back over programs to see just how many stories were obviously sourced from green groups ... Allegations are flying that the broadcaster is building an unhealthy reliance on getting 'investigative stories' from shrub-huggers—or, in other words, are being spoon-fed. It doesn't just smack of laziness. The ABC must surely realise that with friends like that they don't need enemies.

That, perhaps, is the most astounding part of the whole story, given the criticism of Fullerton's two earlier stories and the constantly raging 'ABC bias' debate. The ABC, like all large organisations, is not a monolith—despite the appearances it may give to outsiders. Within the ABC, there are staff acutely aware of their role as part of a 'national

broadcaster'—literally, a broadcaster devoted to serving the entire nation, particularly the audiences that Australia's geography have made it financially unviable for commercial media to reach until the advent of mass-market satellite and other new technology.

There is a true sense of public service broadcasting that is ignored or simply unknown to people outside the ABC, particularly media watchers who, naturally enough, concentrate on the main media markets in the capital cities. Regional ABC radio stations, for example, play vital roles in the communities they serve and enjoy close ties with what are, in many cases, audiences with virtually no other media options. Programme makers who strive to maintain this public service broadcasting ethos worry about the concentration of power and resources at ABC headquarters in Ultimo and its growing satellite on Melbourne's Southbank—and a management bureaucracy that always seems to be expanding and always ready to swallow dollars that could go on broadcasting.

This phenomenon and the culture it creates are at the centre of the debate over 'Lords of the Forest'. We should be asking to just whom is the ABC accountable rather than pointing the finger at individual journalists. It is a matter for the ABC Board. In December, the ABC's Independent Complaints Review Panel [ICRP] upheld three complaints made by Forestry Tasmania and TCA against 'Lords of the Forest'. The ICRP, according to the ABC, is 'an independent body established by the ABC Board to investigate allegations of "serious cases of bias, lack of balance or unfair treatment arising from an ABC broadcast".'

The complaints claimed that 'Lords of the Forest' was inaccurate, showed bias and lacked balance and fairness in examining forest issues. The ABC's own media release on the

subject states:

The Panel acknowledged in its report that the ABC had already apologised for the two factual inaccuracies contained within the program. The ICRP also noted that the ABC had satisfactorily answered many of the complainant's objections.

The ICRP Report stated, in part:

'There were inaccuracies and some misrepresentation of facts in 'Lords of the Forest'. The program often, though not invariably, presents only the 'anti-Lords' (anti-logging) version on disputed issues of fact. It frequently casts doubt on the credibility of the 'Lords' (logging industry) and their supporters, but scarcely ever subjects their opponents to the same treatment.

'Accordingly, the Panel partly upheld the complaints. The specific elements upheld as serious breaches are;

1. Inaccurate map of Tasmania: The map misrepresents logged, logging and reserved forestry areas of Tasmania. Accepting the map as accurate leaves a reasonable viewer misinformed as to forestry management in the State. (Previously acknowledged by the ABC).

2. Unsourced vision: In no less than four instances the program uses vision either out of context or unattributed as to its source, misleading to the reasonable or average viewer.

3. Emotive language: The emotive language of the program invalidates the claim that every effort was made to bring balance to the production. Perhaps justified as isolated individual and contextual descriptive phrases, the frequent use of pejoratives leaves the reasonable viewer with the impression that the program is anti-logging i.e. seriously lack-

ing in balance and fairness.'

That, however, is it. There is no mention of sanction or further apology.

The 'factual errors' have been dealt with by a link on the *Four Corners*' website for 'Lords of the Forest' that appears almost as a footnote, headed 'Update', rather than as a correction. The link takes the browser to a page that is, at least, headed 'Errata'.

On *The Lords of the Forest*, broadcast on 16 February 2004, it was stated that Van Diemen discovered Tasmania. In fact, Van Diemen commissioned the voyage in which Abel Tasman became the first European to sight the island.

Huon pine was also included in a list of hardwoods. It is actually a softwood.

In addition, a map showing the proportion of Tasmania that has been protected from logging was simplified during the production process. Although the accompanying narration was accurate, *Four Corners* accepts that the map was oversimplified and apologises if it misled any viewers. A more detailed map is available below.

No apology is made for the errors, while the nature of the correction only emphasises their egregious nature. The question of language is not dealt with.

In February this year, the Australian Broadcasting Authority found the ABC guilty of failing to present factual content accurately. Complaints can only be made to the ABA if viewers first raise their concerns with the original broadcaster of the material under question and are dissatisfied with the response they receive. On this matter, the broadcasting regulatory authority has shown itself, again, for the toothless tiger it is.

Its media release states that, despite the negative findings, 'In light of the ABC's actions in correcting the inac-

curacy, the ABA does not propose to take any enforcement action in relation to the breach on this occasion.' On the basis of the ABC's Website, the broadcaster appears to have offered no formal response to the ABA finding.

The ABC's approach is best demonstrated by its decision to enter 'The Lords of the Forest', along with Fullerton's two other contentious environmental stories, for the Australian Government Peter Hunt Eureka Prize for Environmental Journalism, held under the auspices of the Australian Museum, while the complaint procedure was underway. (They won, but that—and what will now happen to the \$10,000 prize—is another story). As early as 8 April last year, Geoffrey Crawford, the ABC's Director of Corporate Affairs, wrote to Barry Chipman of Timber Communities Australia stating, 'While I note your concerns, the ABC cannot agree with your view that this program was unfair and partial. A wide range of opinions, including your own, were featured by *Four Corners*, and the ABC is satisfied that the report was an informative and fair investigation of a public controversy.'

Chipman wrote to the ABA about the Independent Complaints Review Panel finding on 11 January this year. He referred to the ICRP ruling, then said: 'The Managing Director of the ABC has advised that he is to take no further action other than the issued media release of 10th December 2004 that stated in brief some of those findings...'

Forget questions of bias. This raises one much simpler matter. Where is the public service broadcaster's sense of public service? Perhaps the ABC Board can tell us.

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