

[Address by Professor Dame Leonie Kramer DBE to The Royal Society of New South Wales at the Annual Dinner held at the Sydney Hilton on Tuesday, 18th March, 1986]

Asa Briggs, describing the early life of the BBC, wrote:

it was no longer engaged in an ordeal for survival; it was gradually acquiring a more mature and confident personality of its own.

These words have a familiar ring, for both the sentiment and the metaphor have been applied many times (and at different stages) to artistic development in Australia. They could have been written by any one of a number of critics of Australian literature in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. They remind us that there are institutional, as well as cultural examples of the links between the old world and the new. There is nothing novel about the general proposition that a newly settled country will begin by importing what it needs until it learns to make things for itself. As in literature, so in broadcasting, Australia was fortunate in its inheritance, and in particular in the example provided by the BBC.

The ABC was born into a decade which had not begun promisingly for the arts. There was none of the literary excitement that had been generated in the 1890s round *The Bulletin*, and none of the major journals which have since played so important a role in the dissemination of ideas about literature and the arts had been established. There were attempts to lay down the principles of a national literature and theatre, notably by the Jindyworobak movement and its founder Rex Ingamells, and by the writer Vance Palmer, but these efforts did not stir the imagination of the public. To this Australian community, sceptical of its own cultural capacities, much inclined to regard imported literature, theatre and music as necessarily better than anything that could be produced locally, and uncertain of standards of accomplishment, the ABC began to broadcast. It will perhaps never be possible to make a definitive assessment of its contribution to Australian cultural development. But over the next fifty years it effectively established and supported the musical life of the country through its broadcasts and orchestral concerts; through its school broadcasts and general talks it helped to educate countless numbers of people; it provided services to isolated communities, so far as its technical facilities permitted; and it provided a new medium for writers, (especially in radio and drama and features), musicians and actors; above all, it was relied upon by the whole community for accurate and objective news and information services. Towards the end of the 1930s Australian literature showed the first signs of flowering into the modern world, and the ABC must take some credit for having prepared audiences for new artistic energies. It is quite unlikely it could have done any of these things without the Reith model of broadcasting to guide it.

Australia has not been good at creating general ideas, and is still not (though it has been conspicuously inventive in science and technology). But once the fundamental principles were understood, their implementation was marked by originality and by sensitivity to the needs and interests of the audience. The comparison with literary growth again suggests itself.

The ABC was established only five years after the BBC became a corporation whose charter guaranteed its independence of both government and business. Even before this, however, Reith had set the stamp of his own high ideals and vision upon the operation of the British Broadcasting Company. At the valedictory dinner which marked the end of 'the old BBC', Reith restated his philosophy of broadcasting and said

We have tried to found a tradition of public service and to dedicate the service of broadcasting to the service of humanity in its fullest sense.

Three particular aspects of Reith's philosophy were translated directly into the ABC – the absence of the profit motive, the idea of national coverage, and the establishment and maintenance of the highest standards. Both those last two principles demand a particular concept of the audience. Reith took the view that 'it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public than to under-estimate it'. He also referred, not to a mass audience, but a number of different publics who together make up the audience. As Briggs comments:

The 'publics' are treated with respect not as nameless aggregates with statistically measurable preferences, 'targets' for the programme sponsor, but as living audiences capable of growth and development. In other words, Reith's theory of public service began with a conception of the public.

Australia was the fortunate inheritor of these ideas, for like many other countries throughout the world, it looked in the late 20s to the BBC as a model. So the ABC began with clear objectives – to serve people throughout Australia; to offer a range of programmes which in content and presentation would provide, so far as is possible, something for everyone at some time; and to maintain high standards. From the beginning, however, the ABC suffered by comparison with the BBC one singular disadvantage. It had commercial competitors – the B-class stations. Reith warned Menzies in 1935 that unless they were checked they 'would become so powerful that no one would touch them.' In the following year Menzies acknowledged that Reith had been right, and when Reith asked if they were going to 'put things right' Menzies replied 'No, we haven't the guts'.

Meanwhile the ABC was following closely the structural arrangements and programming policy of the BBC. Departments of Music, Talks, Education and so-on mirrored their model, much as Charles Harpur a century earlier had taken over poetic forms from his British predecessors. And as Harpur's circumstances and environment gave those forms new substance, so the character of Australia placed different obligations upon the ABC. Country areas in particular relied on it, and rural broadcasts assumed great importance. News and information were eagerly awaited by scattered populations with inadequate roads where great distances delayed mail services. Had Reith visited Australia in the early 1930s (he did not until 1945) he would have had ample confirmation of his faith in the value of broadcasting, and of the soundness of his humanitarian vision. Perhaps he might even have been surprised to see how firmly the ABC had taken root in the still uncertain cultural climate of a new civilization. But at that time the ties of knowledge and feeling with Britain were still strong. These ties, seen as a weakness by fervent nationalists then and now, were a strength for many Australian institutions, not only for the ABC.

It is a measure of the difference between Britain and Australia that the importance of the independence of the ABC has not been as well understood as has the BBC's. Public service broadcasting came to mean over the years broadcasting conducted under the rules of bureaucratic operations. As time went on the ABC was gradually strangled by the finicky attention of government departments, and intermittently threatened by politicians made uneasy by its independent voice. John Curtin's fine speech to Parliament in 1945 defining the difference between the national broadcaster and government agencies was seemingly forgotten:

The Government recognises that the intent of the Australian Broadcasting Act is to create a position of special independence of judgement and action for the national broadcasting instrumentality. This is inevitably the case because of its highly delicate function in broadcasting

at public expense news statements and discussions which are potent influences on public opinion and attitudes. As the legislation provides, this peculiar function calls for an undoubted measure of independence for the controlling body of the national broadcasting instrumentality which cannot be measured by the constitution of other semigovernmental boards or agencies which do not impinge on the tender and dangerous realms of moral, religious, aesthetic and political values.

In the last resort, the healthy and beneficent function of national broadcasting and the maintenance of public confidence in the system must rest, in all matters touching these values, solely on the integrity and independent judgment of the persons chosen to determine and administer its policy, and not on either review by, or pressure from, any sources outside it, political or nonpolitical. This principle holds good in spite of the necessary responsibility of the Commission to Parliament, through the Minister, for the legitimate use of its funds under the terms of the Act, and all the sections of the Act should be read in the light of the above general intent of Parliament in the establishment of the Commission.

Australians are afflicted by government activities at all levels, and the ABC's capacity to plan ahead and to develop policy initiatives was greatly hampered by the requirements that it work to the regulations of a number of government departments, and respond to numerous enquiries, most of which seemed remarkably adept at ignoring first principles. At the same time, Reith's warning about the proliferation of commercial broadcasting interests proved correct; and since these operate upon precisely that concept of audience Reith rightly rejected, there has long been a conflict between the ideals embodied in the various Broadcasting Acts, and the realities of broadcasting in Australia. (It is interesting that the advent of the ITA in Britain seems to have brought about a 'duopoly', and that both organizations pursue similar ends from a different funding basis.) Commercial stations appeal to the materialism of Australian society, and constitute formidable opposition to the ABC. The position was greatly exacerbated by the advent of television. It was taken for granted – as it should not have been that the ABC could continue to fulfil its obligations under the Act with one television channel, and at the same time attract a reasonable audience share against the well-funded commercial outlets. It is difficult to imagine that, without the benefit of those clearly stated and firmly implemented principles that earned the BBC a world reputation even in its early years, the ABC could from within have generated the understanding of its role and the will to fulfil it which have, in spite of its critics, marked its operations.

On 1 July 1983 the ABC became a corporation, and was released from the supervision of the Public Service Board in relation to its staffing policies. This represented a real improvement in its capacity to review its staff and to begin to develop the flexibility so long enjoyed by the BBC. Early statements from the new organisation referred to ending the dominance of BBC programmes. (Though not specifically stated, this was a reference to television, and seemed rather like complaining that Shakespeare dominated the theatre.) Since then there have been more discreet references to diversifying sources of imported programmes and increasing Australian content. But what is Australian content? Is it, in literary terms, Henry Lawson or Martin Boyd? Patriot or expatriate? Could it conceivably be both? To put the question this way is to suggest that the debate about literary nationality is political, and that is probably the truth of it. The recent emphasis on popularising the ABC is, in some measure, a reference to unspoken assumption about the nature of the 'real' Australian audience.

Whatever is meant by popularising, however, it implies the pursuit of that 'mass' audience so firmly rejected by Reith. That it does mean this is reinforced by the adoption by the new corporation of a commercial image. Now there is much talk of those 'statistically measurable

preferences' that had no part in Reith's concept of the public. The difference in outlook is instructive, and might, in its own way, reflect a deliberate, if not entirely rational, tugging at the supposed apronstrings, and a superficial response to the increase in Australia's non-English speaking migrants. In the last decade there has been a marked tendency to confuse Australia's political status (frequently misrepresented as one of dependence on Britain) with its historical legacy.

The literary model and the institutional one, as I have described them are in conflict at the present time. The 'new directions' of the ABC are, in part, a rejection of the past and of the history of the ABC, in favour of competitiveness and a simply conceived nationalism and populism. Writers – and artists in general – represent the deeper understanding which comes from contemplation of past and present, and of the way individual lives are moulded by knowledge and experience. Both tendencies take distinctive forms in Australia, and their tensions might be productive. But it is difficult not to hope that the artistic impulse will triumph, and in doing so revitalize those institutions which need to respond to change without surrendering to mere novelty. If, to use Hal Porter's words this is 'a country with a fluctuating soul', much of its potential richness will depend on its recognizing and not dismissing that vision.