Over the last two weeks a national controversy has raged concerning the R.S.L. and the Australian Broadcasting Commission. I thought it may be interesting to survey what has happened because not as many people in Western Victoria have television as in the capital cities and there may be many people who have been aware of the controversy without having seen the programme.

At the moment, I have a script in front of me which records what was said. However, I want to point out at the outset that this script is a strictly edited one. People were interviewed on the programme who did not appear on the programme and the remarks of Sir Raymond Huish were cut. His full remarks did not appear on the programme. I have tried to obtain a copy of the full programme before the editing but have not been able to do so.

The programme starts with a misquotation of the Governor-General. The Governor-General had attended an R.S.L. meeting in Canberra in which he said, and I quote - "We must not let our prejudices harden with our arteries". The Governor-General identified himself with the League in this remark. The programme made a subtle change and claimed that the Governor-General had said - "members should not let their prejudices harden with their arteries".

The first person to appear on the programme was a Mr. Gawne. He set the tenor for the whole programme. Mr. Gawne recalled that, as a child, if he saw an R.S.L. badge he would dodge the wearer. He did not want the beery sentimentality that would be thrown at him. He said that the image of the R.S.L. is largely influenced by the Club. He said that young people were not impressed by the R.S.L. and why should they be?

This opening spokesman, unrecognised by the R.S.L., set the tenor for the whole programme.

The Editor, Mr. Ashbolt, introduced a University student, a Mr. Wolenski, by saying that the RSL had been trying to
maintain its influence by building up Youth Clubs so that the R.S.L. and the spirit would be a continuing factor in Australian educational, social and political life. According to Mr. Ashbolt, Mr. Wolenski did not regard this as a good thing. Mr. Wolenski claimed that the R.S.L. is ready to give up the civil liberties which its members fought so hard to attain during the war. He ended his remarks by saying - "But the R.S.L. too often seems to say - 'Well, we fought for Australia, therefore we are right and anyone who opposes us, well, they are un-Australian scabs'."

This set the pattern for the second major critic of the R.S.L. who appeared on the "Four Corners" programme.

Straight after Mr. Wolenski, the A.B.C. excelled itself by interviewing Alec Robertson, Communist Editor of the "Tribune", who was, of course, expelled from the R.S.L. at the time at which the R.S.L. expelled all Communists from its membership. You can well imagine what Mr. Robertson said. He was given three or four minutes uninterrupted time to make his points.

Mr. Ashbolt, the A.B.C. representative managing the programme, gave the Communist Editor of the "Tribune", a degree of respectability by his following remarks. He said that Mr. Robertson's criticism had been foreshadowed by D.H. Lawrence after his visit to Australia in the 1920's. Intentional or unintentional, Mr. Ashbolt underlined and emphasised the criticisms made by Mr. Robertson, the Communist.

Mr. Ashbolt then takes the programme to the R.S.L. Club Room and speaks to one or two people who are obviously sincere but not necessarily vocal. They say that, in their opinion, the main purposes of the R.S.L. are to maintain their own comradeship and to assist their friends who had been less fortunate than themselves. Then Mr. Ashbolt says - "But whatever the R.S.L. means to these men, the younger generation has a different view reflected by the Copenhagen downstairs review in Sydney's King's Cross. This was a serious introduction to a skit that would have had any member of the R.S.L. laughing at an annual Smoki Night but which, as a serious interpretation of how people regard the R.S.L. was disgraceful and
shameful. It, perhaps, typifies the programme that the A.B.C. and Mr. Ashbolt had to go into a wine cellar in Sydney's Kings Cross to get what the A.B.C. and Mr. Ashbolt regard as a serious young peoples' view of the R.S.L.

Then followed Mr. Ashbolt's penetrating and hostile interrogation of Sir Raymond Huish, the R.S.L. Deputy President.

The other person of some note who appeared on the programme was Mr. Swartz, Minister for Repatriation who, in his own right, is also a prominent member of the R.S.L. It is worth noting that Mr. Swartz and Sir Raymond while on the programme, were both closely cross-questioned by Mr. Ashbolt who tried to elicit points of view that would put the R.S.L. in an unfavourable light. They tried to get Mr. Swartz to admit that the R.S.L. had an illicit and unreasonable influence on the Government and they tried to get Sir Raymond Huish to admit that the R.S.L. was playing party politics.

I will recall the point which I made at the beginning - that the remarks of Sir Raymond as they appeared on the programme were strictly edited. Some of his remarks were cut from the programme.

On the other hand, Mr. Gawne, the unknown critic who opened the programme, Mr. Wolenski, a student critic from the University, and the Communist Editor of the "Tribune, Alec Robertson, were all allowed to make their points uninterrupted by Mr. Ashbolt. In doing this, Mr. Ashbolt has violated one of the critical rules of constructive criticism. If any organisation is under attack by some public authority or by some public means of communication, to be fair, you must not only attack the organisation in question but also the people who are critical of the organisation.

Mr. Ashbolt did not do this. The R.S.L. was attacked but the critics of the R.S.L. were not attacked. They were not questioned. This is a mistake that would not be made by responsible members of the Australian press. Before a journalist is allowed to put his name to a by-line or to write an article for a newspaper he must serve many, many years' apprenticeship. On the other hand, television has suddenly burst on the Australian community. People who have had no responsibility for public communications are suddenly given an audience of anything up to 4 million people.
Such a large audience and such a powerful medium of publicity as is provided by the A.B.C. in every State and in nearly every city of Australia demands a greater responsibility than has been shown so far.

There is another test that can be applied to this particular programme and that is a sheer question of space. The R.S.L. has spent hundreds of thousands of pounds, probably millions, since the last war on welfare. Its most important projects have been concerned with War Veterans' Homes. A few years ago there was a great appeal called "Operation Gratitude" which raised, I think, about £1M. for the construction and maintenance of Homes for war veterans and World War 1 nurses. These welfare activities of the League were given only 22 lines throughout the whole programme. These 22 lines were not designed to give a balanced view of R.S.L. welfare work but were references made to this work almost in passing. Mr. Gawne spoke for 35 lines; Mr. Wolenski for 25; Alec Robertson, the Communist Editor of the "Tribune", for 30. This is a total of about 90 lines to the critics of the R.S.L. to which must be added the skit from the King's Cross wine cellar and, possibly, some of the remarks of the A.B.C. interviewer, Mr. Ashbolt. The defendants of the R.S.L. were one or two people from the R.S.L. Club Room at Caulfield who were given an opportunity to speak very briefly, but principally Mr. Swartz, Minister for Repatriation, and Sir Raymond Huish. These two spoke for a total of 59 lines. In all, less than half the space given to the critics and their space did not enable them to put a balanced view across for the simple reason that Mr. Ashbolt was interrogating them to establish points that Mr. Ashbolt wished to establish.

Frankly, the A.B.C. should be ashamed of this programme.

There remain only two points I want to make. The programme was introduced by Gerald Lyons who later was reported in the Sydney press as disassociating himself from the programme saying that he had nothing to do with its construction. He is reported as having said he was concerned with his professional reputation. Secondly, the A.B.C. is independent of the Government and has not been directed by the Government over this programme. The Government has given
it no instructions as a result of this programme. The independence of the Commission stands. This has been confirmed in statements by the Prime Minister, the Postmaster-General, Sir Charles Moses, General Manager of the A.B.C., and Dr. Darling, Chairman of the Commission.

The A.B.C. must remain independent but I am quite certain that if it had not been independent from the Government this programme would never have appeared.