PRESS STATEMENT:

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September 22nd, 1963

A.B.C. TELEVISION PROGRAM

"FOUR CORNERS" AND THE R.S.L.

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 there may be many people who have been aware of the controversy without having seen the program.

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 for the program who did not appear on the program and the remarks of Sir Raymond Huish were cut. His full remarks did not appear. I have tried to obtain a copy of the full program before the editing but have not been able to do so.

There were three main critics of the R.S.L. on the program. The first of these was Mr. Gawne who recalled that, as a child, he would dodge an R.S.L. badge because he did not want the "beary sentimentality" that would be thrown at him. He said: "Young people are not impressed by the R.S.L. and why should they be?"

The next major critic was a University student, Mr. Welenski, who claimed that the R.S.L. is ready to give up the civil liberties for which its members fought during the war.

After Mr. Welenski, the A.B.C. excelled itself by interviewing Alec Robertson, Communist Editor of the "Tribune", who was expelled from the R.S.L. when the R.S.L. removed all Communists from its ranks. Anyone could imagine what Mr. Robertson said. He was given three or four minutes' uninterrupted time to make his points.

Mr. Ashbolt appeared to introduce these three critics and, in some sense, to sum up the remarks in a manner that emphasised and highlighted the criticisms.

Mr. Ashbolt then took the program to an R.S.L. Club Room at Caulfield and spoke to people who were obviously sincere members of the League. They described the main purpose of the R.S.L. as maintenance of comradeship and assistance to other members who have been less fortunate than themselves. They were only given the briefest opportunity to make this point. 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 Smoko Night but which, as a serious interpretation of how people regard the R.S.L. was disgraceful and shameful. It, perhaps, typifies the program, that Mr. Ashbolt had to go into a wine cellar in Sydney's King's Cross to get what the A.B.C. and Mr. Ashbolt appear to regard as a serious young peoples' view of the R.S.L.

The two people on the program who tried to speak for the R.S.L. in a positive fashion were the Deputy President of the League, Sir Raymond Huish, and Mr. Swartz, Minister for Repatriation, who, in his own right, is also a prominent member of the R.S.L. Both Sir
Raymond and Mr. Swartz were closely cross-questioned by Mr. Ashbolt who tried to elicit points of view from them that would be unfavourable to the R.S.L. He appeared to want Mr. Swartz to admit that the R.S.L. had an illicit and unreasonable influence on the Government and Sir Raymond Huish to say that the R.S.L. was playing party politics. Sir Raymond's remarks at this point were strictly edited. Everything he said did not appear on the program.

It is worth contrasting Mr. Ashbolt's interrogation of these two people with the unrestricted and uninterrupted time given to the critics — Mr. Gawne, Mr. Welenski and Alec. Robertson, the Communist. In doing this, Mr. Ashbolt has violated one of the cardinal rules of constructive criticism. If a means of public communication such as A.B.C. television is used by people to attack an organization such as the R.S.L., then the person managing the program, in fairness, should make sure that the critics, the attackers, are also closely questioned and interrogated. This was not done. The R.S.L. was attacked. Its advocates were closely interrogated, but the critics of the R.S.L. were neither attacked nor questioned. They were allowed to make their points without interruption. No responsible member of the Australian press would conduct an important interview in this fashion. Such a powerful medium of publicity as is provided by the A.B.C. in every State and in nearly every city demands a greater responsibility than is revealed on this program.

There is another test that can be applied to this particular program, that is the test of space given to the different people. The R.S.L., over the years, has spent hundreds of thousands of pounds, probably millions, since the last war, on welfare. These activities of the R.S.L. are most important but they received little attention on the program. The three major critics of the R.S.L., together with the skit from the King's Cross wine cellar were given, I think, more than twice the space allowed Sir Raymond Huish and Mr. Swartz. In addition, the management of the program by Mr. Ashbolt and some of the remarks made by him would appear to make it reasonable to class him with the critics.

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

There remain only two points I want to make. The program was introduced by Gerald Lyons who, later, was reported as disassociating himself from the program because he had nothing to do with its construction and was concerned about his professional reputation. Secondly, the A.B.C. is independent of the Government and has not been directed by the Government over this program. The Government has given it no instructions as a result of this program.
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