

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL THAT FAILED

In the failure of Government to influence television there may be a moral for our other ailing arts.

Should there be a Minister of Fine Arts in Canberra? The question was raised again recently at a Melbourne symposium on the sad state of our urban design. Some form of Government support or encouragement of our weaker arts was the subject of Australia-wide discussions a few years ago, involving eminent workers in many fields. A Royal Commission into the state of the arts was proposed, and a lengthy report was sent to the Prime Minister in 1960. Nothing more happened. Yet the concept of Government aid continues to beckon as a final desperate solution to the general lack of creative opportunity (in science as in the arts) in this country.

We are apt to forget that one special kind of art is already controlled. In television, Australian talent is encouraged and protected by Government policy and the law, and has a guardian angel in the form of a permanent Control Board. The Board reaffirms at intervals its dedication to the development of Australian culture and local talent. This is just the sort of thing that frustrated or unemployed operators in some other fields dream about.

But unfortunately the high-minded attempt to control television has been a phenomenal and complete failure. The Government's policy to encourage Australian production, rising standards, and programs of reasonable intelligence, and social value has not been implemented. Television channels break the rules laid down by the Broadcasting Control Board with cynical lack of concern and apparent impunity. American imports have choked out most of the attempts at commercial television drama

that were made seven or eight years ago. Despite 'Mavis' and one or two others, there is proportionately less Australian creative television now than at the beginning. The story of the once healthy, now dead, Australian film industry has been repeated. As a meaningful communicator Australian commercial television has died only nine years after it began - and all the time under the guidance of the Broadcasting Control Board.

Some branches of Australian artistic enterprise, like sculpture, serious architecture and play-writing, are really no more than gnarled twigs, undernourished for years. If they eventually wither or break off under the blast of international canned culture probably none but a few fanatics will shed a tear.

However, at least one branch - popular entertainment - is so big and important that if it goes the whole tree for all practical purposes can be written off. A nation that cannot provide its own diversions for its own leisure time must be very small, or very old, or socially ailing. Thus the proportion of Australian creative talent in the great mass medium, that hypnotic little screen, is a matter of vital social importance.

But there is no need to flog this point for it was recognised at the outset. It was one of the reasons (apart from economy) that we were denied television for 11 years after World War 2: our Government wanted to be sure that when it came it would be good.

Television's social significance was stressed by the Royal Commission which led to the belated admission of TV in 1956.

"The objective of all television stations must be, from the outset, to provide programs which will have the effect of raising public taste," reported the Commission, and it called for the furthering of "national

objectives", and for making "the best use of Australian talent."

These high original objectives have, of course, been by-passed and forgotten. As we all know, commercial television, which attracts the bulk of viewers, purveys nothing but an American image. There are exceptions of course: even some Japanese sorcery. These are but flickerings across the surface of a picture which is almost continuously oriented, throughout drama, comedy, children's sessions and commercials, to the American way of life.

And a very good way of life that is. In several ways it is more civilized than our own, and a mighty good influence. I suspect that ordinary Australian manners - politeness and pleasantness in social intercourse - have improved in the last nine years purely under the influence of the suburban comedies. Not to mention male dress.

On the other hand it is not our way, and for various essential economic and geographic reasons it never will be. We adopt ~~only~~ a poor-man's version of it, secondhand and secondrate, in fragments of vocabulary and new pronunciations that mate unhappily with an Eliza Dolittle 'A'.

But no-one denies these things. Everyone, it appears, is in favour of the idea of building a fine Australian image on television. After the Royal Commission in 1953 the Postmaster-General introduced the act which allowed TV entry to Australia, with words which were calculated to out-bid Labour's support of Australian content.

"No one on this side of the chamber", he said, "will bow to anyone else in his determination to use (television's) potentialities to the utmost extent for the development of Australian art and culture." And he added, "The importation of American productions cannot be allowed to

continue to the detriment of Australian production."

When the hearings for the first licences began it was clear that applicants left the Government behind in their enthusiasm for home-grown programs. For the very first year, ~~before really getting up steam,~~ successful applicants in Sydney and Melbourne volunteered a high proportion of Australian content: TCN-9 promised 50%; GTV-9, 54%; ATN-7, 67%. The highest bid was by HSV-7: no less than 72%. In recommending licences for these applicants the Broadcasting Control Board remarked that in the first two or three years the going would be hard but it had looked for a "genuine intention to commence on high standards even at financial loss."

At the last count published by the Control Board last year, TCN-9 was the only station to have more than 50% Australian content. It had 51.7%. All the rest had under 50%, and have since dropped further below that mark.

The Australian-content figure always includes news, sports, children's programs, and so on. Less than half of it represents light entertainment of the variety and quiz kind. "Australian Drama", which is really what everyone had in mind when they spoke of Australian talent, represents two per cent. "The Arts", which the Government heroically promised to encourage, occupy 0.3% of Australian-content time.

The failure of the pioneer stations to keep to their enthusiastic advance estimates was - at first - understandable enough. No one had the experience here before 1956. But by the time the next applications for licences were heard, experience - and cynicism - had grown greatly. The successful applicant in Melbourne, ATV-0, promised ^{in the first year} no fewer than six major Australian programs, including drama, a domestic comedy,

and a program called Walkabout which would show us how other Australians live. It was proposed to spend on these £900,000 per annum and to offer £1,000 for drama scripts. In short, this was just what everyone was waiting for, if it could be done.

The Broadcasting Control Board, in recommending ATV-0, said:

"We attach a great deal of importance to the nature of program proposals of this applicant We are satisfied that they are both realistic and economically practicable and give real evidence of an appreciation of the problem of reconciling high standards with financial stability."

Not one of the quoted promised programs has ever appeared on Channel O which instead now runs two feature films nightly. In Parliament last week Mr. A. A. Buchanan (Lib. Vic.) asked the Postmaster-General (Mr. Hulme) about this channel's drop from a promised 58% Australian content to 15%.

Mr. Hulme, who has come lately to a task which no one envies him, replied that the company had no television experience when it made the promises in its application.

Very fine; but the Broadcasting Control Board presumably had experience. ^{It was} That way why it was given the job of holding long and costly hearings of the applications. Apparently it made a mistake; it was perhaps over impressed by the riches and power of the applicant. This may be only human, but now that the evidence of that mistake is apparent to all, what does the Control Board do? According to the Postmaster-General, the Board (just like any other Telly fan) keeps ATV-O's programs under constant consideration.

In its last report the Board admitted that five other stations "failed to

comply with the Minister's requirements to televise at least two hours of distinctive Australian programs in the peak viewing period between 7.30 and 9.30."

It added that this had "been taken up" with each station. That was nearly a year ago, and since then the Australian content in their programs has declined further, and lately faster than ever.

In what other walk of our bureaucratic, democratic life can a privileged position be maintained in defiance of Ministerial requirements? What other licences are allowed to run on after the holders have repeatedly broken their promises and flouted Government policy?

Three years ago the situation was serious enough. Then the Senate Select Committee was appointed to inquire into "The Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television." Its report was highly critical of "the vague and uncertain attitude" of the Control Board's Chairman, Mr. R. G. Osborne, with regard to the Board's obligations, and stressed the weakness of the Board while it worked on the basis of "sweet reasonableness" - never threatening nor taking disciplinary action, despite its wide powers and its frequently expressed dissatisfaction with commercial programs.

The reason for the death of Australian creative commercial television is, of course, simply a money matter. We pay comparatively highly for our American TV programs - about \$1600 for a half-hour show. (The charges vary all over the world, according to what the market will bear. New Zealand pays less than one-tenth as much as we do.) Nevertheless a station would have to pay more for an "equivalent" local production. And at the same time local productions, made on shoestring budgets to try to compete, cannot be as polished as the canned goods. And while

they are denied more opportunities they must remain comparatively in experienced and unpolished. This vicious circle can be broken, but only with bold ideas, dedication, and a revival of the ideals of ten years ago.

Meanwhile the annual cost of American television sessions to Australia is about £4 million ^{film} and Australian writers and actors of ability continue to drift overseas.

The Senate Select Committee remarked: "We are virtually subsidizing the American film industry; neglecting our own; importing large quantities of television programs and exporting that precious and irreplaceable commodity, our Australian artist."

No action has been taken on the Select Committee's report, and Australia remains one of the few countries in the world (including U. S. A.) which does not protect its own television artists and productions.

The whole sorry affair must have a moral for workers in other under-privileged fields of art in Australia. The moral seems to read like this: Ideals and ideas apparently are not able to live in a permanent bureaucratic body. If you want help from Government, think of another way of getting it.

What is promise, anyway? It's promise of progress, surely; which implies a sense of direction. But the Australian cultural pattern, from our erratic censorship to our television programmes to the appearance of our streets, shows singularly little of this sense. For instance, in the minds of a great number of sincere and well-meaning municipal councillors, progress (it seems clear) is accomplished in almost any act of change. Cutting down an avenue of old trees and replacing them with multi-coloured concrete pots is, to them, inevitably, progress. Progress Associations often applaud this sort of change.