

# Tall trees and taller stories at the ABC

MY friend Tom Gould was filling in as night news editor at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Toronto studios a few years ago when CBC executives brought the visiting head of, I think, Nigerian television to meet him. Pleasantries were exchanged and the executives took their guest off to dinner.

Later that night the party returned, clearly refreshed.

"Well," said Gould to the African visitor, "did you get stoned?"

"By whom?" asked the head of Nigerian television anxiously.

It is to be hoped that the ABC's managing director, David Hill, suffers no inhibiting trauma to diminish his enjoyment of meetings with public broadcasters in other parts of the world. But he took a big risk last week of stirring up his news and public affairs staff, even to the point, conceivably, of tempting them to cast a stone or two at him.

Hill had received a report of an internal ABC inquiry into complaints by the West Australian Minister for the Environment, Bob Pearce, and others regarding a Four Corners program, shown nationally on June 18, about management of the State's karri and jarrah forests.

In a covering letter sent to Pearce with a copy of the inquiry report, Hill noted that Four Corners had lived up to "the standards expected of the ABC's news and current affairs". That seems to me to be an entirely sound conclusion, but if I worked for ABC news and current affairs I would certainly have taken as an insult the suggestion that these were my standards.

Hill seems also to have modest expectations of internal inquiries into complaints about ABC bias. As I have written on another occasion, the Four Corners program, *The Wood for the Trees*, relentlessly twisted reality and perpetrated dirty tricks of imagery and



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emphasis to achieve an anti-business, radical environmentalist tone compatible with the left orthodoxy of prevailing ABC culture.

The report on the ABC's internal inquiry, made public by Hill last Thursday, is a sneaky, weasel-y whitewash.

Rather than attempting to recapitulate criticisms of the program, it might be more productive for me to set a goal of inspiring only moderate boredom and concentrate on bad-mouthing the inquiry report in its own right.

Its chief weasel manoeuvre is to sidestep responsibility for some of the most outrageous bits of propaganda, by saying they were the opinions of people who don't work for the ABC. This is done on six crucial occasions.

Murray Johnson: "We have just one chance at this resource ... and at the moment we are mining it, we are quarrying it."

The ABC report whinges about Four Corners "being attacked for a statement of opinion made by a critic of CALM (Western Australia's Department of Conservation and Land Management), not by the reporter". But Johnson is the operator of an art gallery in the small timber town of Pemberton, selling hardwood artefacts among other *objets*. What possible reason could a re-

porter have for consulting *him* on forest management and regeneration apart from expectation of "correct" answers?

Philip Toyne, head of the Australian Conservation Foundation: "The timber industry is a disaster for the proper ecological management of forests."

The ABC claims it presented this astonishing piece of greenie dogma only as the opinion of "a senior representative of the Australian environmental movement".

Four Corners was unable to grasp an opportunity offered by CALM to interview a forest ecologist with scientific credentials because the interview was offered "as part of an extensive itinerary ... on a day when it was explained to CALM that the Four Corners team had only the morning to spare". A weasel would blush!

Toyne again: "At the same time as you're seeing this vast increase in resource going into woodchip, you're seeing a massive decline in local jobs as local sawmills have closed."

The ABC inquiry claimed that Four Corners research showed an overall decline in timber industry jobs over the past two decades. But "the parallel between this decline and the increase in export wood-chipping ... is a matter of opinion. It is open to the ACF to draw this conclusion".

And it was, of course, open to the ABC to present Toyne's bold statement as coming from an authoritative source, and then attempt to weasel out of it by saying it "does not represent Four Corners' assertion, but that of the ACF".

Johnson again: "The fault is definitely with the Government to give our timber resource, at a subsidised rate, to a private concern who uses the wood much less efficiently than other milling methods that are available."

The ABC says that the question of indirect subsidies being "a central issue of the film, there is no reason why this statement by Johnson of his view should not have been included in this way". But there is a reason. Johnson is a gallery owner. Putting him in the spotlight in such a way is no less weird than it would be to seek the opinion of a timber miller on gallery ownership.

Alex Syme, identified as a farmer but not, as he might fairly have been, as an environmental activist: "... the old forest will soon be gone".

CALM says that the balance between harvesting and replanting is now at a sustainable level. The ABC says: "Mr Syme's claim about the fate of the old forest was his opinion."

## 'Weasels in a whitewash'

What a claim, though! An end to the magnificent karri and jarrah forests of Western Australia. Soon. It is a wonder the ABC interviewer was able to suppress a gasp of horror. Evidently he was struck speechless by the revelation and was quite unable to seek further detail from Syme.

Doug Drake, a small sawmiller advocating public auctioning of all jarrah and karri timber: "If the Government was silly enough to be so radical as to do it all in one hit ... the worst that would then follow would be that you'd have a few hundred people unemployed for a few months, until CALM decided to sell that wood to some new industry people, who would then re-employ the ones that were put off work."

The ABC says: "Mr Drake's opinion is his own, not that of Four Corners."

Syd Shea, executive director of

CALM, also expressed an opinion, in an interview with the ABC team, that the result of auctioning timber would be "extraordinarily good prices for a year, then the whole industry would become chaotic, and there would be massive unemployment".

Shea's opinion was not aired in the program because, says the ABC inquiry report, it is not the practice of its documentary makers "to slavishly run statement and counter statement to every issue raised in a particular program". So there!

It is up to Pearce and the West Australian Parliament to continue being at least moderately boring about the chicanery the ABC, one of our most potent opinion moulders, practises in the cause of increasingly irrelevant and archaic ideology. I hope they do, but change in the ABC's mindset will probably come only from an intellectual uprising by bright, ambitious program makers within the organisation.

There is a wonderful short story by the regrettably near-forgotten British humorist Ernest Bramah about a young painter who revolutionised art in ancient China. Until he came along Chinese artists portrayed people in profile, always facing in the same direction.

Undeterred by the assertion of his teachers that this was the correct way to paint people, Bramah's hero taught himself to draw them facing both ways — and created a magic new world in which people looked each other in the eye, exchanged smiles, kissed, played chess and discovered debate and discourse.

The story was in one of Bramah's books about Kai-lung, the droll wandering minstrel. Perhaps Four Corners research could track down the title in time for Hill to buy some copies for distribution around the ABC at Christmas.