

DISCUSSION ON THE MEDIA RELEASE BY THE FEDERATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN COMMERCIAL  
TELEVISION STATIONS.

The Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations has called on the Government to postpone the introduction of Ethnic Television. It has described the introduction of such services as "precipitous" and "without consideration of alternative methods"; it has stated that "very little research into the actual needs of Ethnic Groups appears to have been commissioned"; it has spoken about the risk of "perpetuating segregation instead of fostering assimilation and integration"; it has expressed fear of the "commercial involvement".

Let us deal with these immediate statements of F.A.C.T.S. before tackling the other issues raised in the paper. The description of "precipitous" of an action taken 22 years after the introduction of television (migrants were arriving at the annual rate of almost 200,000 twenty years ago) would seem to reveal that the Australian Commercial Television Stations never considered, even academically, a special kind of service for the two-million adult residents whose first language was not English. To state that alternative methods are not being considered confirms the above. THEY WOULD HAVE OTHERWISE PROVIDED SOME EXPERIMENTAL FORM OF SPECIALISED PROGRAMMING FOR "ETHNIC COMMUNITIES" INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT ALTERNATIVES.

The Commercial Television Stations ~~forthel~~ claim that little research has been commissioned to discover what the needs of the communities really are. Again, it seems as if F.A.C.T.S., wishes to underline its total ignorance of one of the most incredible demographic and sociological phenomena occurred in Australia. In one office alone there is a petition with 20,000 signatures asking for some soccer matches to be screened other than from Great Britain. Even such simple and basic request (devoid of great technical problems or costs) has always been completely ignored.



A similarly ignorant approach is at the basis of F.A.C.T.S.' reference to "segregation" as against "assimilation and integration"; we are not quite sure where the spokesman of F.A.C.T.S. has been living over the past 20 years not to know that assimilation as a concept has been buried; that integration means respecting other people's characteristics, and that the broadcast or telecast in languages other than English has a broadening and not a restrictive effect on the minds of people. But even if it were an impediment to integration, which it isn't, psychiatrists would still recommend it because it is a safety valve for the mental and emotional health of a great number of people. We are now, in fact, approaching a time when the early post-war immigrants (and we are talking in terms of hundred of thousands) are getting on in years. In the "older" communities, some 30 years of residence in Australia have advanced the age of the original immigrants into the 50-60 bracket. This means that there is a growing number of pensioners, many of whom are widowed, some invalid. A large number of them are forced to live in relative isolation children and grandchildren having moved away and monetary restrictions often making it necessary to move into a small unit in a strange neighbourhood. Such enforced seclusion and withdrawal from society, together with the age-related symptoms of regression into the past, result in feelings of loneliness and often despair. Radio and Television programmes can play an enormously important role, providing moral support and comfort, particularly since reminiscence serves an important function in the elderly and is integral to this level of one's life. In helping them to relive their past, such programmes help the elderly to maintain their sense of self-esteem.

Many of them experience, at this stage of their lives, the desire to go back "home" even though they may not have thought about it for many "active years". This desire to "return home" can be better satisfied by exposure to the "old culture", "images from home", "sounds from home" than by an actual return. Because Australia is where home is now, except that it lacks some cultural connotations whose absence is becoming increasingly obvious. If these people were to go back (since the question of money has been brought forward) the loss to Australia in sheer exportation of life savings would be enormous.

The commercial stations, seemingly concerned with linguistic ghettos today, have actually never produced or broadcast any single programme which would give credence to their sense of social responsibility toward those who, in fact, were forced by them to live in ghettos built around them by



the lack of understanding or care for their linguistic and cultural problems. One is inexorably driven to conclude that this "concern" could be related to the possible "commercial involvement" of ethnic television.

Yet even on this score FACTS fails to assess actualities; the amount of new advertising stimulated by ethnic television could, on its own, justify the presence of a new television network.

In its attempt to prove why Ethnic Television should be postponed, FACTS states that 64.2 per cent of the total Australian population watches more than 13.5 hours of television a week and that the percentage of Southern Europeans (the largest ethnic group apart from the anglosaxon) watching it is even higher: 71.8% (see Neil Anderson). FACTS comes to the conclusion that this proves there is no need for specialised television for them since they are already enjoying it as it is.

We will accept those figures, as quoted, but offer different interpretations; on the one hand it's mainly the children who turn the T.V. set on, this especially so in an "ethnic" household where the adults don't know English well enough; often enough they are busy doing something else, or receiving visitors and indulge in adult-talk-in-a-foreign-language (not quite the right cup of tea for their children), and the children find the T.V. set a pleasant escape; their parents have no control over such occurrences for the reason cited. What also happens is that people who don't know English are so desperate that they will try and get something out of the visual quality of television anyway. As to how much they get out of it (both in reference to content and language) is greatly debatable.

Let us now come to the objection that the future generations of Australians may not be interested in "foreign languages"; such statement presumes that migration will cease and that interest in "foreign languages" must decline. If we were to indulge in such crystal-ball gazing we should say that, since statistical projections see a great decrease in the natural growth of the Australian population, FACTS should consider closing one of its stations and offer its vacated frequency to S.B.S.

S.E.B.A.C. also considered quite gratuitous FACTS' statement that some unnamed "leading educationalists" are concerned about the learning difficulties encountered by children in families where little or no English is spoken. The superficiality of this statement is abhorrent; S.E.B.A.C. suggests that F.A.C.T.S. is merely trying to score a debating point. First of all, in most "advanced" countries (and that includes The United States, Canada) it has been found that the learning of a second language is actually a by-product of the improved knowledge of one's own original language in the regular course.

The USA, Canada and other countries have, in fact, accepted the principle of television stations broadcasting in languages other than English.

WHY NOT  
FERNANDEZ  
POPOFF  
OR TOTO'?

Finally, F.A.C.T.S. would have to explain why hundreds of thousands of taxpayers, after eight, nine or ten hours of work in a factory, should try and squeeze their brains in order to get a laugh out of Benny Hill when he or she, could so easily, sit back, relax and enjoy Fernandez? Or Popoff? Or Merlina Mercuri? F.A.C.T.S. would also have to explain why it should be considered offensive for someone to tune in and listen to poetry reading in Italian or German or French if that person is not interested in what happens in the streets of San Francisco?

Commercial stations will have a hard time trying to convince us that, by tuning into their channels, we are exposed to a process of "Australia-ization". The members of SEBAC suggest that it is much more relevant to Australian children to be exposed to Ukrainian legends, Greek myths, Slavonic dancing and Asian cultures than to the inanities of American suburbia or the violence of a more urban American environment.

These are the real facts. If the commercial stations are afraid of losing a slice of the rich commercial cake, all they have to do is smarten up and make sure they don't miss the bus; or don't they believe in competition?