

CENSURE MOTION

Statement in the House of Representatives by  
the Rt. Hon. the Prime Minister, Sir Robert  
Menzies, on Thursday, 18th April, 1963.

---

I must say, Mr. Speaker, that I listened, as I always do, with great interest to the words of my old friend the honourable member for Bonython (Mr. Makin), who became, I thought at one moment, quite impassioned on this subject. I do want to point out to him with all friendliness that he fell into a few errors. He made a demand for parliamentary control in this matter. Everything that has been done - and which is now the subject of attack - has been done under statute of this Parliament and through an instrumentality set up under a statute passed by this Parliament.

I would have suggested to my honourable friend that he be a little cautious about invoking the authority of Parliament when, in the case of his own party authority has been handed over to the 36 men. Honourable members opposite may moan and may groan, but the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) would not be allowed to move a censure motion here today unless it came within the authority of the 36. Just remember that fact. Then the honourable gentleman attacked the Act of Parliament. This is a censure motion, and presumably, like its happy predecessor last week or the week before, is designed to defeat the Government and produce an election. It is wonderful to realise how passionately fond the Labour Party has suddenly become of an election fought on the television law. Already two elections have gone by since the law was passed, and I do not recall the Labour Party making a point of it at either. Of course, the reason why it did not make a point of it in either election was that it was convenient on those occasions to play for the support of some, at least, of the commercial television stations.

Well, Sir, that prudence has now been abandoned. The Labour Party - with authority, I trust, from its outside 36 - has nailed its colours to the mast. In this debate it has said "We are for nationalization of television. If we come into office we will take the earliest possible steps to wipe out the existing commercial television licences and put the whole thing into the hands of the Government." No longer is there any mystery about that policy. I hope it will be well remembered when the time comes. In due course - some time off yet - we will be having an election.

Then, my honourable friend got rather heated, I thought - if I could apply such a word to so mild a man - about a licence being given to a wealthy group. I hope he will forgive me if, looking at this report, I point out - and I am reading the names of applicants that I never heard of until we got the report - that Community Television Limited - it was a splendid arrangement - is comprised of 1,000,000 shareholders of 5s. shares held by returned servicemen and returned servicemen's clubs; members and affiliated branches of the Australian Labour Party (Victorian Branch); and then, to my joy and surprise, members and affiliated branches of the Liberal and Country Party. I did not know they had this money. Then

the next class is Electronic Industries Limited - they are in for 1,000,000 shares - and Electronic Industries Limited and holders of ordinary shares in Electronic Industries Limited. They are practically the same people, and they are in for 1,000,000.

Then consider the directorate. This is a poverty-stricken affair. My friend talks about the Government giving a licence to a wealthy group. Bless my soul, 1,000,000 shares out of 5,000,000, so far as I can judge from this document, are in the hands of the Warners. I thought from what I heard from the Leader of the Opposition that the Warners were anathema. They are rather comfortable people when the Labour Party and my party and somebody else wants to get a licence. This is not a bankrupt show, I venture to say on the face of it. Then my honourable friend says, "Is not this dreadful that a licence is to go to a wealthy group?" I venture to say that none of us in this House would want to sit down and concoct an application for a licence, and find ourselves called upon, by the inevitable logic of circumstances to find £1,000,000 or £2,000,000, and to have to carry a loss of £500,000 or perhaps £250,000, before we got into the profit bracket. I would become so excited at that prospect that I would become unfit for further work.

Because our time is limited I want to point out a few distinctions that have been overlooked by honourable members opposite. I do not mind them moving a want of confidence motion about television policy, but they have directed very little attention to that. They have concentrated their venom on the recent applications and the recent decisions. I just want to say this: It is one thing for any government to establish a royal commission which is designed to make recommendations on policy. We have had those. We had a celebrated royal commission on banking of which the late Mr. Chifley was a member. That commission made a valuable report. It was not binding on any government on either side. As a matter of fact, it was a long time before any one of the recommendations was taken up and put into effect. A royal commission which is designed to produce policy recommendations does not exempt the government of the day from accepting its own responsibility on policy. That goes for a Labour Government, I am sure, as much as it goes for mine.

But where you have, as in this case, an Act of Parliament which provides for the setting up of a broadcasting control board, for the calling of applications for a licence and the reference of applications to that statutory board, and then requires that statutory board to make a report and recommendations, it is an entirely different matter. This is not a broad question of policy. I think honourable members forget that.

Let me talk about Victoria in this instance. The Government called applications for a licence. About seven or eight - I have forgotten the exact number - of applications were received. The applicants formed companies and established boards of directors. They spent thousands and thousands of pounds in completing their financial arrangements and schemes, engaging solicitors and counsel and in producing evidence. I suppose that in the case of the Victorian applications - and it goes for everywhere - there must have been scores of thousands of pounds, and many weeks, expended in the making, pursuit, and the hearing and criticism of the various individual applications.

It would be a very strange thing for a government to say, when all that is over, "Sorry; you have wasted your time and your money; we propose to pay no attention to the report of the board."

I give it to my honourable friend that if he had his way there would not be a board and there would not be commercial licences - I understand that - but let him accept the proposition and let everybody accept the proposition that there is a law, that there are commercial licences, that there is a board, that there are investigations and that there are reports all made under the law of this land. In these circumstances, a government, I venture to say, having received a report, would need to have overwhelming reasons before it rejected the recommendation. I am putting this as a cold, hard matter of fact; it would need to have overwhelming reasons because, if it did not and it said, "We do not like this recommendation", what does it do then? Does it say, "He is out; we do not care for this; send it back for another enquiry; let everybody come along once more and we will have another investigation, or perhaps open it up for other people." This is not real life. Would the Opposition - I invite them to consider this very carefully, and I invite the people to consider it - if it did not like the nomination, say, "Right; that is finished; we will now pick our own." I wonder.

I repeat that apart from two casual observations that were made to me a week or two before this report became available, I did not know who the applicants were in Victoria. Now I do. I have seen their names. I might say to myself that some of the reasoning in the report is quite unsatisfying to my mind - I could well say that - but did I therefore say, "No, I reject your nomination; on looking over the list I am going to pick so and so." I wonder what would be said then.

It is a very interesting thing for honourable members to carry in their minds, that the successful applicant has a board, the chairman and dominating man in which is Mr. Reg. Ansett, whom I perhaps meet once a year, who has no political affiliations that ever I heard of. Indeed, my first association with him was when I was the Victorian Minister of Railways and put through a transport regulation bill which put him off the roads. Such bosom friends are we that that is the simple truth. That is a fact. Anyhow, this is a man of enterprise. He is tough; he is a driver; and he has undoubtedly achieved remarkable things. When I first knew him he was very favourably regarded by the Labour Party, indeed, but now he has succeeded and, of course, that is fatal. But he has a company, the board of which embraces, as we have been reminded by the honourable member for Indi (Mr. Holten) this afternoon, a couple of gentlemen who could not by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as supporters or admirers of the Government. They include, of course, a celebrated Labour candidate, Sir George Jones.

But if honourable members look back at the other one - what is its name? - United Telecasters, it has nine men on the board, eight of whom are, and have been for years, my very close personal friends, but they did not get the recommendation. This is what all this favouritism charge is worth. Here are men, literally eight out of nine, who are close personal friends of myself, some of whom I strongly

suspect may be supporters of the party that I lead, and the board does not recommend that group. It recommends Ansett Transport Industries, with no political associations, except to the extent that there are known hostile ones. It gets the nomination. Can we as a Government now reject the recommendation and substitute for it some choice of our own? If we had substituted our choice; if we had, for example, selected Universal Telecasters, the one of which Sir Frank Selleck is chairman, I could imagine honourable members opposite being in such a passion of rage that they would have had seizures.

Sir, the essence of this matter is that when you establish an independent board and that board conducts exhaustive inquiries, very costly to the parties concerned, you are not entitled to reject the recommendation of the board except for overwhelmingly powerful reasons and none, of course, have been put forward.

Time runs on and, therefore, I just want to turn to another aspect of this matter. The honourable the Leader of the Opposition knowing, because he is not without intelligence, the force of these arguments, and knowing them in advance, thought fit to convert this discussion into what I can only describe as a villainous attack on a series of people - wicked and villainous. I was shocked by it. If it had come from other sources in his party, I would have understood it, but coming from him I must confess that I was shocked by it. What has he said about the matter? First of all he has accused Mr. Ansett and his company - because you cannot distinguish them for this purpose - of being bankrupt. This is a terrible thing for a man to say under the cover of Parliamentary privilege, to make a remark so actionable if spoken outside Parliament that the honourable gentleman would find himself ending up in the bankruptcy court. Let me remind the House and let me remind the people of what he said about this man who has battled his own way and achieved a remarkable success. He said -

"Ansett Transport Industries Limited has £6,000,000 worth of assets of dubious value, and liabilities amounting to £32,000,000."

If he had only troubled to look at the balance sheet of Ansett Transport Industries Ltd., he would have found that the assets were not £6,000,000 but £35,000,000, but he did not bother about that; he set out to create a false impression. He continued -

"... to all intents and purposes the man is broke."

That is a nice thing to say, is it not, about a man conducting a great service industry in this country - he is broke. He would not dare to say this outside Parliament. Then -

"Anybody who has seen his balance sheet wonders how he carries on. He carries on only because he has the backing and support of this Government."

all his obligations to which will have been discharged completely by the beginning of next year. Then he goes on rashly and says -

"He is the only man who has borrowed money at 8 per cent. and 8½ per cent. around Australia and been able to survive. Korman has crashed, Hooker has crashed...."

When did L.J. Hookers crash? I suggest to the honourable

member that he say that outside Parliament and see what this firm has to do about it. But, they have all crashed, and he continues -

"Ansett is the only one so far who has escaped."

It is a great pity that the honourable gentleman is so unconcerned about the facts before he makes these charges, because I just want to tell him, if he likes to be told, that on the stock exchange during the past twelve months, unsecured notes at the rate of 8 per cent. interest were registered on behalf of Australian Consolidated Press. I did not hear that it was bankrupt. Ampol Petroleum had unsecured notes listed at  $7\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. I had not heard it was bankrupt. Clyde Securities had them listed at  $8\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. Felt and Textiles, one of the great textile industries of this country, is borrowing at 8 per cent. Then we have General Motors Acceptance - how bankrupt they are - borrowing at 8 per cent. and Humes Limited borrowing at 8 per cent. The Overseas Corporation has unsecured notes listed at 8 per cent. I do not need to protract the list. The fact is that this was a monstrous untruth. If the honourable member really wants to escape the condemnation of decent people in this country, he ought to take the first opportunity to retract it. So much for his charge against the Ansett Company.

But he does not stop there. He makes a charge of dishonesty and corruption against the Government. Let us be quite clear about this. He says that the Government told the board what recommendation to make. He produced no evidence of such a monstrosity. I am the head of the Government and, until a fortnight ago, I had heard of no applicants at all, and then I heard of a couple by accident. He charges the Government with having said to the board, "This is what you are to recommend." That is corruption if ever there was.

I cannot imagine anything more dishonest than for a government to suborn a statutory committee to forego its duty and to make a false report not carrying its own judgment. But that is his charge against the Government. Of course, his third charge is against the board itself. These are reputable men. They cannot stand up in this House and answer, and they cannot take proceedings in the courts of the land for statements made here. And these people are accused of having so far foresworn their duty as to take instructions from the Government and then go through the arrant humbug of conducting hearings, listening to evidence and making a report! The honourable member for Eden-Monaro (Mr. Allan Fraser) yawns, because this is his cup of tea, this is his form; but it is not normally the form of the Leader of the Opposition.

These are the charges, and I want everybody in Australia to understand that these charges have been made without a skerrick of support for them. He talks about a royal commission. I wonder what he would say. Does he want a royal commission on his charges with no parliamentary privilege, with himself available to be put into the box to disclose the alleged sources of his information? Of course he does not! We have had experience of that before today. And so he says, "Let us have a royal commission, not about these foul, damaging charges that I have made, but on the general question which was investigated by a royal commission only a few years ago."

Sir, one thing that stands out crystal clear in this debate, which I think is a valuable one, is that the Opposition, having set about the task of destroying the Government, is not for the first time destroyed by its own attack. In reality what emerges from it and what everybody ought to take notice of in the cities and in the country is the fact that if the Labour Party came back into office, commercial television would go out and people would be closed up. They might let their licences run for a year or two, but they are bound by their policy which is to close up commercial television and put all the instruments of television communication with the people into the hands of a government body, which, if experience counts for anything, will be compelled by a Labour government to bow the knee in the house of Rimmon. This is a very simple debate from my point of view. If I may say so, it has been a very enjoyable debate. I have never felt so clearly that an attack was so futile or so doomed to disaster.

---