

Television on nobody talking

Hector Brimson - April 2001

Brimson was musing the other day why the debates in New Zealand on the “great issues generate a fog of muddle and misunderstanding.

Why the country’s mood swings like a national bipolar disorder, depression to euphoria from North Cape to the Bluff.

The answer is the TV.

Aside from wrecking the whole idea of neighbourhood and substituting the village of the screen for what were once communities it has done tragic damage to the national debate.

The “National Debate”, the “public discourse”, is the strains of argument and debate among those in the nation that are bothered by the big questions.

Why are the schools failing, who should be in charge of accident victims?

Where should our taxes be spent?

In civilised societies they used to sit around the campfires, gather in the great parliaments, meet in the great halls and trash these issues out.

Such meetings did not necessarily come to a cardigan wearers consensus or part in happy politically correct “thank you we have see the light and will mend our horrid ways” sort of endings.

But rather the participants in the national discourse understood each others points of view a bit better, changed their minds occasionally and sometimes glacially, imperceptibly made a reach for common ground.

In the world outside New Zealand the debates in the local halls, in the societies and around the have long passed into memory and these issues are debated on public radio on public television or in the US in the commercial channels where the debate is at least considered as part of a national duty.

And they are debated without the interruptions of commercials

But not in New Zealand, which is one of the reasons why, it is slipping from the category of a civilised nation into barbarism.

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In New Zealand there is no public TV. It is crassly commercial parody of what a public television system should be.

The national discourse is conducted in seven-minute intervals interrupted by 8 minute commercial gaps.

A sniping remark, in and out with the cheap retort, the snappy shallow response and you can avoid any issue, fudge any answer and evade all responsibility for cogent thought.

Content is removed and the issues are set aside for cheap point scoring and verbal chicanery.

Presenters know the art of getting a stoush up just before the commercial break, a point of drama to get the viewers back after the longest ad breaks in the western world.

Debate has become a pathetic yah boo sucks shambling slanging match.

No idea can be longer than seven minutes divided by equal time for the those present. No documentary may carry forward the theme of an argument or an exposition beyond a few fleeting minutes of attention.

You wonder why the owners of this outfit, the citizens, put up with it.

Why every night they sit in front of “their” Telly and get treated like sheep.

Shorn of their intelligence and their money, slowly being “dumbed down” to a bunch or seven minute babblers adrift in a sea of issues wafting in and out of national consciousness, flickering points of importance lost in a fog of ignorance and rancour.

The answers fairly simple and it’s on show every night.

If you act like sheep you’ll get treated like sheep.

Much of this and you’ll think like a sheep and eventually behave like a sheep.

Baaaaaaah!

Hector Brimson