



Orchestrated Campaign Against ABC TV Mardi Gras

The ABC received 5163 letters of protest before its telecast last month of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade; 3372 of these letters were identical and 2566 of these came from NSW.

The ABC is in no doubt that the protest was an orchestrated campaign.

It also claims to have evidence that a poll conducted by the program TVTV, widely quoted as showing overwhelming public objection to the program, was hijacked by groups opposed to the telecast.

Pre-program phone calls to the ABC, though its switchboard and its 0055 Mardi Gras special line, were more evenly spread: of around 5000 calls, 3500 were opposed and 1400 were supportive of the ABC's decision to cover the parade. Experienced operators monitoring the calls on the special Mardi Gras line, where the score was 3 to 1 against the telecast, recognised voices making repeat protest calls, once again suggesting a well-organised campaign.

By contrast, the response generated by the actual screening of the program was 'overwhelmingly supportive', ABC spokesman Roger Grant told *CU*. In total, two million people around Australia watched the parade on television. In Sydney, the program easily won the ratings, gaining the ABC twice its normal Sunday night audience. It came second in Brisbane, third in Melbourne and Perth and fourth in Adelaide; perhaps it is seen, parochially, as an essentially Sydney event.

On the night of the parade, the Channel Nine program *Hey Hey It's Saturday* crossed live from 6.30pm to the preparations, yet Channel Nine and the ABA received almost no complaints. Whether by coincidence or not, *Hey Hey* had one of its highest ratings ever on that night.

Academic to Study the Response

The ABC has commissioned the University of NSW's Dr Ian Marsh to prepare an analysis of the response both before and after the screening of the program. Dr Marsh was responsible for an important study on the economic impact of the Mardi Gras which showed it to be a major earner of tourist dollars and a generator of economic benefit to Sydney as well as to the country as a whole.

Meanwhile, the ABC itself has been able to draw some preliminary conclusions about the public response. Roger Grant told *CU* that the letters, unlike usual ABC letter writers, were 'extremely judgemental'. They did not cover a wide cross section of Australia, since only 29 came from Tasmania and a mere nine from the ACT. In all, there were fewer than 500 from outside NSW.

The great majority of protest letters were generated by a group called Tradition Family Property Australia Centre, a Catholic organisation. Smaller numbers of letters came from Presbyterian church interests and fundamentalist Protestant groups.

Videos Going Like Hot Cross Buns

Meanwhile, the ABC's full-length two hour video of the parade has been selling extremely well and is expected to reach a total of 5000 sales soon. The video is being marketed in NTSC format, as well as in PAL, to attract buyers from the United States. Orders are continuing to roll in from overseas, ABC Video's Meredith Watt told *CU*.

The video was advertised in the gay press in advance of the parade and many people ordered it through major stores like Grace Brothers and David Jones, which also took copies for sale over the counter. Shops along Sydney's gay mile in Oxford St reportedly did a roaring trade too.

The video's sales performance is excellent given that at \$39.00, it is one of the ABC's most expensive tapes. As a comparison, the classical music/natural sound/images tape *Nature's Landscapes*, heavily promoted on ABC-TV since its release in February, has sold over 9000 units at \$30.00. □

