

Does the Press Appreciate Broadcasting Problems and Policies?

IN passing through Christchurch after his recent visit to Britain, Mr. L. R. C. Macfarlane, a member of the New Zealand Broadcasting Board, in the course of an interview with the Christchurch "Press," drew a contrast between the general attitude of the public in New Zealand to our broadcasting system and the attitude of the British Press and public to the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Mr. Macfarlane, said "The Press," complained of the little space afforded to broadcasting news by New Zealand newspapers as compared with established journals in England, and asserted that the press generally had been antagonistic to the Broadcasting Board.

"Most of the leading men in all walks of life in England are very proud of the British Broadcasting Corporation," said Mr. Macfarlane. "In this respect there is a pointed difference between England and New Zealand. In England they are proud of their institutions, but the attitude here is quite different. There should be a little more enthusiasm, and pride in the country for what it has done."

People were apt to draw unfavourable comparisons between the license figures in England and New Zealand, he said, and the board had been criticised in the past on the ground that in New Zealand there were fewer licenses per 1000 of population. But it had to be remembered that New Zealand was a poor country compared with England, and that the present slump was not being felt nearly so much in England as in the Dominion. In the circumstances, he thought that the figures were very good.

TO this comment the Christchurch "Press" devoted an editorial in general repudiation of Mr. Macfarlane's conclusions. The major comment was as follows:—

He (Mr. Macfarlane) might have said, for instance, that the Broadcasting Board has in a very short space of time produced a remarkable improvement in the coverage and technical quality of New Zealand broadcasting and that the achievement has not been accorded adequate recognition. On that point few who are familiar with the difficulties which have been overcome would contradict him. But criticism of the Broadcasting Board, in the press and elsewhere, has been concerned almost exclusively with the quality of its programmes; and Mr. Macfarlane will have some difficulty in showing that it is merely capricious, a reflection of a natural tendency on the part of New Zealanders to belittle their national institutions. He must surely realise, for instance, that the organisation of talks is still elementary, that little attempt has been made to exploit broadcast plays, and that there has been no systematic attempt to foster and organise local talent. The weakness of programmes on the political and sociological side is not entirely the board's fault, since the absurd restrictions on controversy have left it very little freedom. But the main reason for bad programmes is simply that the board's advisory and directing staff in educational and cul-

tural matters is not large enough and lacks imagination. When that defect has been remedied, the Broadcasting Board will have some chance of commanding the same admiration in New Zealand as the British Broadcasting Corporation commands in Great Britain.

IT seems that Mr. Macfarlane has some very definite grounds for the comparisons he made, and it would be very much to the benefit of broadcasting in general if the New Zealand press and public did extend a little more appreciation of the work that has been done.

The press in general, with some honourable exceptions, is not in our opinion, free from blame in this matter. Cases are within our knowledge where, simply because the pastime of making the board a cockshy is popular, letters of attack have been encouraged and even written by staff members to provide "good copy." The result has been to hinder rather than help broadcasting, for people, being influenced by the atmosphere of criticism created by this press propaganda, have refrained from buying radio sets. A number of such cases are within our knowledge, one in particular coming to mind where a recent purchaser stated definitely that had she appreciated just how good radio was she would have equipped her home much earlier. She had refrained however, because press criticism had induced her to believe that the service was poor. On sampling it herself she found it was not poor. That is not an isolated instance. Undue press criticism has restricted the service instead of advancing it, and those centres where press propaganda has been strongest show the least advance in listeners.

The leader-writer of the Christchurch "Press" concentrates his criticism upon the quality of programmes, and

specifically charges those responsible for them with lack of imagination and limited vision. Listeners who will devote a moment's thought to this matter will appreciate that in all progress it is usually necessary for the "horse to precede the cart." By this we mean that the board, not having inexhaustible funds at its command, has adopted the sound commercial course of devoting its revenue first to providing really good transmitting stations, while maintaining a fair average of programmes, rather than limiting expenditure upon equipment and expanding it upon programmes. Before you can deliver water to a city, you must instal the pipes. That is what the board has been doing, and having equipped the Dominion with the most up-to-date and modern transmitting stations the board in the very near future will be able to expand its activities in relation to programme improvement.

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Mr. L. R. C. Macfarlane, the South Island member of the New Zealand Broadcasting Board, who said last week that the New Zealand press generally had been antagonistic to the Board.