

Education and ETV

Threats have no place in program discussion

April 12, 2005

Robert Rainey is taking some heat lately in his role as chairman of ETV, South Carolina's educational television network. But we trust he's not getting out of the kitchen, despite the efforts of Rep. John Graham Altman, who would like to see just that.

The Charleston Republican filed a bill last week to remove the ETV board because of a documentary that was critical of how the state funds public schools. He also wants the legislature to have authority to approve replacements, which would essentially put ETV under the control of the legislature, or, as Mr. Rainey put it, the majority party of the legislature. And regardless of which party is in power, ETV must not be obligated to any party, nor any lawmaker's limited view of what is and what is not good programming.

Mr. Altman has never been timid or tentative about exercising his rights to free speech in a democratic society.

Apparently he doesn't accord the same rights to South Carolina ETV.

Mr. Altman wants to punish ETV, its chairman and its board for doing just what it is supposed to do: generate conversation, shine light on issues that affect South Carolinians and present those issues honestly, as grandma might say, warts and all. He referred to ETV as "a propaganda arm" that airs "these advocacy shows" and "places its stamp of approval" on such productions.

The documentary "Corridors of Shame" features "crumbling walls, leaky roofs, faulty fire alarms and unheated classrooms," according to published reports. It was funded by private donations. Those donors included Mr. Rainey and other friends and family of John Rainey, who is the driving force behind the production that takes an honest look at education in areas of our state that are not as fortunate as our own.

John Rainey, in speaking to an audience at Anderson College earlier this year, made clear his conviction that education is one of those areas in which we have a responsibility, simply as good people who care about our fellow man, to ensure it is offered in equal measure statewide. All of our state's children deserve the best education we can give them.

Education is not just a local issue, not just an issue for parents who have children in the public schools. It is a statewide issue, an issue for business, an issue that can affect business development and industrial recruitment. But most of all, it's an issue that affects our state's future, not just the future of students but the future of entire communities.

This isn't the first time Mr. Altman has confused the message with the messenger. Last November, he criticized ETV for airing "We are your Neighbors," a documentary on gays

in the South, as part of a series on Southern life. He said at that time that ETV was "actively promoting homosexuality."

Balderdash, as Hyacinth might say.

ETV doesn't promote or disassociate itself from its programming; it simply does what it was created to do. It educates, it gets people thinking and talking. It attempts to make us all more aware of what's going on outside our little portion of the state, makes us aware and encourages us to care about the nation and the world.

Most of all, ETV operates independently of commercial sponsors. It should be able to operate without threats from lawmakers who might be more attuned to scripted reality shows than real stories about real people who through well-researched and honest appraisals of our state are making a real difference for South Carolina and its future.

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