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'MacNeil/Lehrer': FAIR Game

As an admirer of the debating skills of Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Utah conservative, I had another moment recently to appreciate his talents. He was on the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour." Hatch's quickness of mind is easy to admire because none of his ideas get in the way.

That cheap shot aside—only expensive ones from now on—"MacNeil/Lehrer" viewers can't help but marvel at Hatch. He is often on the program. The same for other Senate and House conservatives who are regulars: Malcolm Wallop, Richard Lugar, Henry Hyde and Mickey Edwards.

These five conservatives were among eight members of Congress who appeared on "MacNeil/Lehrer" three or more times in a six-month period in 1989. Only one of the eight, Michigan's Rep. David Bonior, is a strong liberal.

On the "MacNeil/Lehrer Vanilla Pudding Hour," five guests from the right and one from the left is a diversity. A watcher of the program's lineup is Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a New York nonprofit group that works to eliminate bias and censorship in the media. From the evidence that FAIR reported last week, "MacNeil/Lehrer's" guest list teeters between a rightward tilt and a rightward prostration.

In the nightly roundup of experts, two corrals were drawn on: the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies and the more conservative American Enterprise Institute. While 14 guests were brought in from those bastions, no one was invited from such established liberal centers as the Institute for Policy Studies or the World Policy Institute.

Ninety percent of the U.S. guests on "MacNeil/Lehrer" were white, and 87 percent male. Eighty-nine percent were current or former government officials, corporate officers, or such professionals as doctors, lawyers and academics. Six percent of the guests—about one in 20—were from labor groups, public-interest centers or racial and ethnic organizations.

During the six months, 17 guests—all white males—appeared to discuss environmental issues. Only one came from an environmental group, the rest from governmental agencies or corporate interests.

With such equanimity, hosts Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer, the ho and hum of television journalism, have no trouble maintaining an air of high-toned cerebral discourse. Should a prickly moment occur, one elite guest can console another.

FAIR cites a program when the

chairman of Exxon apologized for the Alaskan oil spill. The governor of Alaska came to the rescue: "The chairman of the board of Exxon, I think, has been too heavy on his own company. . . . Obviously Exxon's skipper caused this accident, but after it took place, I think that Exxon did a good job under the circumstances, I really do." No environmentalist was on the program to say that he really didn't.

To satisfy viewers who might savor a taste of journalistic wildness, the program offers David Gergen and Mark Shields for gentlemanly sparring. The one is a former press aide to Ronald Reagan who called his master's penchant for storytelling a "folk art," the other a dehydrated centrist Democrat specializing in quips.

"MacNeil/Lehrer" is but one example of conservative and centrist partisans being allowed to dominate issue-oriented programming. A whole dugout of right-wing promoters—John McLaughlin, Patrick Buchanan, Robert Novak, William Buckley—has the playing field to itself, with no corresponding time for those dissenting from the left.

Earlier this year, FAIR reported on 865 "Nightline" programs and its 2,498 guests in a 40-month period. With 14 appearances each for Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig, and 12 each for Elliott Abrams and Jerry Falwell, the "Nightline" guest list showed a systematic slant favoring America's power-wielders and a comparative lockout of public-interest progressives challenging governmental and corporate power.

Television's idea of balanced discussion is CNN's "Crossfire," the nightly shout show that pits Patrick Buchanan "from the right" against Michael Kinsley "from the left." Only Buchanan is accurately labeled. Kinsley, neither left wing nor right wing, is a collection of loose-flying feathers that wafts away on whatever breeze of intellectual quirkiness he can find.

FAIR's exposure of "MacNeil/Lehrer" drew a touchy response. Its producer, after denying that his program is one-sided, says: "The problem is that FAIR is concerned with having its own bias represented." True. FAIR's bias is for intellectual pluralism and diversity. The group, which believes in balance, has documented a factual case that both "MacNeil/Lehrer" and "Nightline" are well-guarded enclaves of predictable establishment thinking that heavily favors the right and the well positioned.

That FAIR is now being dismissed as a group of disgruntled leftists by the "MacNeil/Lehrer" producer is in keeping with television's orchestrated resistance to dissent.