American homes via news broadcasts, television, police dramas and 'real life' exposés of crime in America's Most Wanted and Cops. In the segregated city the white audience travels to the other side through these filtered images. They both reflect and generate public perceptions of law and order.

When the amateur video recorder shot the videotape of police officers clubbing Rodney King he brought the filmic representation of policing operations as close to reality as it can perhaps possibly get. The home video camera would seem to be the ultimate democratisation of the medium. Citizens can now videotape their own real life police dramas unedited and unrehearsed. Here the camera was pointed in the other direction and it was the police who were the criminals. But, for this jury, the filmic reality was only one negative image amid a thousand positive ones.

The defence counsel for Lawrence Powell asked the jury to suspend their belief in what they saw. To do this he instructed the jurors to place themselves in the positions of the police involved in the whole context of the beating. But while he had a seemingly impossible task, he was helped by the dominant images of race and disorder built up over generations of cultural representation.

Bryant Gumbal's incredulity at the jury verdict has an ironic edge. He was believing his eyes, for 'the camera doesn't lie'. But for the juror whose reality had been shaped by a weight of social and cultural representation over generations, including the NBC Today show, here was an exception to that rule. Gumbal, of all people, should have recognised the power of scripted reality.

IAN HOSKINS teaches in history at Sydney University.

Kevin Ryan, now a Sydney barrister, had a successful Rugby League career with Sydney clubs St George and Canterbury in the 1960s. He was a state Labor MP from 1976-1984. Since taking over the unpaid position of president of the Players' Union two years ago, he has succeeded in having the draft—the system by which the League controlled the transfer of players between clubs—declared illegal. Now, he has his sights set on establishing an industrial award for players.

Under your presidency the Players' Union has taken steps towards becoming more like a 'real' union. How much further would you like to go along that path, and in what directions?

I saw the Players' Union initially as a tame and captive sort of union, a bosses' union. Fortunately, way back in the early 1980s, someone had registered it under the Trade Union Act, and also under the Industrial Arbitration Act. I took that one step further by affiliating it with the NSW Labor Council. The court case where we overturned the players' draft was a big victory and that's helped to entrench the Players' Union as a true union, and also to lift the morale of the players. At the moment, we're pursuing an industrial award in the State Industrial Commission. Hopefully within a few weeks, it will put in place an award structure requiring minimum payments to the players, including allowances for training, proper insurance cover and superannuation.

Having an industrial award will be the basis of true unionisation. It will be the first of its type in the world—there have been some collective bargaining agreements in American sport, but this will be the only one under a centralised wage-fixing authority. After that we'll be looking at improving conditions for players by, for example, achieving more say in the rule-making department—players at the moment are ignored in this area, and they're precisely the ones who should be consulted.

How has the League reacted towards the increased militancy of the Union?
They don’t like it, just as most bosses don’t like it! But we don’t want to interfere with their managerial prerogative, they can run their organisations badly if they want to, and a lot of clubs are run incompetently. All we want to do is to put a floor under wages and conditions to ensure that our players get a minimum turn out of it.

The NSW Rugby League introduced the retain-and-transfer system in 1960, based on the old system in British soccer, which was finally made illegal there only three years later. How do you think the League’s industrial relations stand now, in comparison both with overseas sport and other sports in Australia?

By way of a benchmark, soccer in England has been industrialised since about 1912. English soccer players have got a strong and militant union, which has, for instance, recently won them a share of television proceeds. The management has had it so good out here precisely because there has never been a real players’ union, or any solidarity among players. When an individual player, Denis Tutty, took on the transfer system in 1969-70, he was on his own. It cost him three years of his life and his football career.

The League are still pretty antiquarian on industrial relations. When changes are made, they tend to follow what happens in America. The draft happened first in America, then in AFL. The League thought that sounded like a good idea, and so they brought it in. But if ever you sat them down and asked them for a constructive, conceptual reason why the draft should exist, all they could do was give you anecdotes about the past. No-one had a vision of what really needed to happen. They didn’t even understand their own draft.

ABC general manager and rugby league club president David Hill has described the League management as “a self-perpetuating oligarchy”. Others have used terms like feudalism to describe the industrial relations system. Why is it that sport has been so slow in coming to terms with modern industrial practices?

In rugby league, it’s simply because there’s no real democracy. It’s a big family really, a mafia form of running a business. I use the word mafia not as a sinister term, necessarily, but in the sense that people are anointed into their positions, there’s no real choice there. It’s been accepted that sport is not run in a way that makes its managers answerable to the people. People are allowed to set themselves up as dictators, and as long as they get away with it, they’ll continue to do so.

It’s the normal role of a union to protect its members from injury at work. In your case, do you see it as appropriate for the Players’ Union to take part in the debate about violence in the game?

In the 1970s the players were found to be under workers compensation cover, so in 1979 the then president of the League, Kevin Humphreys, went to the state government and, with a stroke of the pen, rugby league players were removed from cover under the workers compensation legislation. Substituted in its place was a Mickey Mouse scheme called
the Sporting Injuries Insurance Scheme, which is totally inadequate. In addition to that there has been some private insurance taken out by the clubs, again totally inadequate. So there's a lot of work to be done there to provide proper cover for injuries. As far as violence is concerned, I would like to see the players enter into some sort of social contract in relation to their conduct on the field. A code of conduct with the general support of the players would go a long way to eliminating violence in the game.

Do you agree with the generally held conviction that violence is increasing?

It's hard to compare, because there's so much scrutiny of the game these days through television replays. Certainly I don't like to see viciousness in the game, although it should obviously be a tough and hard game. I thought the last NSW-Queensland State of Origin game was a good example of rugby league's toughness and competitiveness, and the ensuing drama that goes with it. Maybe it's cutting out a bit of ball-handling and subjugating the skills a little bit, but I don't think there's any really unnecessary violence in that.

You mentioned TV. How would you like to see the Players' Union involved in decisions about the TV coverage of League?

Certainly to the extent that some percentage of the revenue should go to the players. They should also have a say in the nature and quantity of it, in the same way that they should be involved in consideration of rule changes and the general promotion of the game. I have a lot of faith in the players. At a recent AGM of the union, it was incredible to hear some of the ideas coming off the floor in relation to a whole range of issues. The problem is that the players have never been given the opportunity in the past, and they should be. There are a lot of original thinkers among them.

Do the players appreciate the changes you've made to the Union?

Like anywhere else, there are union people and there are anti-union people among players. I've also had a very hostile media—sporting journalists by and large are keen to be accepted by the governing body. They'd sooner be treated to a free lunch and publish a press release rather than delve a bit further and make themselves unwanted and unwelcome in the process.

To what extent do you think the players and the Union have a responsibility to the people who come and watch?

I think most players do instinctively feel that responsibility, and that's really why they go for the honour and glory of achieving representative honours. There's very little money involved there. The international players who toured England last time were on petty wages over there, around $150 per week, then when they came back they got another two or three thousand dollars. This is after they've been away from their job and their family for three months, running the risk of injury and all the rest of it. Perhaps the players could be reminded of their responsibility to the public a bit more often, but I don't think any of them would have trouble with the concept that they're there principally to give entertainment.

Where gains have been won for sportsmen and women, such as freedom of contract, it's tended to result in a greater divergence in salary between the top few players and the rest. Is that an acceptable outcome for the Union?

As far as I can see, the way it's gone in America, and the way it's headed in Australia, is that fewer and fewer players are getting more and more of the pie. The size of the pie here is being restricted by the League through the use of the salary cap [The restriction imposed by the League on the total wages bill for each club]. I don't think that's a good form of management, because even though there are so-called stars, and they are important to a team, you still need 13 people to make a successful side. I don't think there's a great disparity between the top and the bottom players in a team as suggested by the present remuneration system. But that's a managerial issue and at this stage I'm not buying into that argument. All we say is that at least there should be a minimum structure.

Why do you oppose the salary cap?

I'm against it in principle, philosophically and in terms of economics, because it's an interference with the free market system and an interference with managerial prerogatives. It also, of course, affects the players in terms of their financial return. I'm not so interested in interfering with what the people at the top might be getting. That's a matter for themselves, as long as the bottom guys aren't suffering.

How do you think the game has changed in the past few years, both on the field and in terms of marketing?

There's a lot of hoo-ha written about changes to the game. I think the game has basically been the same since 1967, when the four-tackle rule was introduced. There have been refinements, and improvements, obviously, and players now are bigger, fitter, faster and better ball-handlers than they were 20 or 25 years ago.

Obviously, promotion and presentation has improved dramatically, and that's one thing I've got to give the present administration. At least they've had the commonsense and humility to get other people to do the marketing, and not try to do it themselves. Whether you agree with the philosophy of what the revenue's being spent on is another matter.

What do you see as the main problems of the revenue distribution?

First of all, it doesn't appear to be equitable. The eleven clubs which didn't get into the finals last year got $290,000 each from the League. Yet those clubs have salary costs of $1.3 or $1.5 million, apart from all the other costs of running a club. That's obviously ridiculous. Something's got to give somewhere. I do concede, though, that they don't want to give it to inefficient clubs, obviously that's just wasting it. I suppose the ultimate answer is simply better management of the clubs, but it's hard to legislate for commonsense and efficiency.

MIKE TICHER is ALR's business manager.