



## Broadcasting the Cultural Policy: Will the Twain Ever Meet?

*From Fossils to Films: a National Forum on Cultural Policy in Australia, Evatt Foundation, Sydney, 27 August 1993.*

**The Evatt Foundation forum provided a useful illustration of the negative effects of the administrative separation of broadcasting and communications from film and television production and the arts generally.**

This separation has created a mindset in the arts community which, unintentionally or not, was reflected in the structure of the seminar and the choice of speakers. It caused UNSW sociology lecturer Gay Hawkins to make an impassioned statement from the floor about the omission from the day's first, plenary panel, of anyone to speak about the centrality of broadcasting in the cultural life of Australia in the 1990s.

Broadcasting remained peripheral to the debate, and a broadcasting discussion group later in the day did little to rectify the situation, being run simultaneously with another group on copyright issues. An extremely relevant and valuable contribution to the broadcasting discussion by Stuart Cunningham should ideally have been heard by the whole forum in the opening session.

Arts Minister Senator Bob McMullen opened the forum with a speech in which he foreshadowed a major cultural policy statement, due out before the end of the year. The appointment of the widely respected McMullen as Minister for the Arts was universally welcomed after the February election. The Evatt Foundation forum was originally intended to precede the election and highlight the arts community's support for the ALP.

McMullen's inclusion in Cabinet is seen as a great leap forward. For the first time the cultural impact of Cabinet decisions - particularly economic decisions - seems likely to be considered. This is reflected in his stated

aims for the policy statement. It would, he said, provide a planning framework of around ten years, and would identify fundamental principles for the development of Australian culture. The main aims would include enabling the Commonwealth to co-ordinate cultural activities better; establishing cultural values firmly and irrevocably in the mainstream of government decision-making at all levels; and creating an environment of funding stability.

[These are all laudable aims, but if they are to succeed there must be general acceptance of broadcasting as an integral part of our culture and our way of life, so that when the word 'culture' is used it is automatically taken to mean broadcasting as well as 'the arts'.]

A pre-election move by arts and production industry interests to have Communications and Arts portfolios brought together did not succeed, but with McMullen in the arts seat, the stage seemed set for a bright new world in which the cultural aspects of broadcasting and communications, as well as the arts in general, would receive equal weight in Government thinking with more mundane matters like industry policy and encouraging competition.

McMullen's appointment to his staff of Janette Paramore, long time worker on behalf of Australian creative endeavour through Actors Equity, the ABT and the Australian Writers' Guild is seen as an important factor in ensuring that broadcasting is firmly on the cultural agenda. (Incidentally, also on McMullen's staff, though as part of his Administrative Services responsibilities, is Mick Trimmer, who has a DTC background and served former Communications Minister Ralph Willis).

However, while broadcasting policy remains with the 'dry' DTC and cultural policy with DAS, McMullen is going to have an uphill battle, as Terry Flew's accompanying report on the BTCE seminar amply demonstrates.

The arts community will also have to shake off its traditional view of broadcasting as something other than 'culture', and begin to inform itself better about the implications for Australian culture of developments in the broadcasting system and its technology.

The first speaker at the Evatt forum, Jill Kitson of the ABC, spoke of the national broadcasters as 'great democratic institutions' which 'reach all Australians' but the rest of the panel - performers and writers - were, understandably, concerned with other matters.

### Bad News on Oz Content

At the broadcasting workshop there was some gloomy news for proponents of Australian content on television. ABC head of drama Penny Chapman said that the days of network-financed drama were over, and that the ABC only finances half of its current drama output, with the rest coming from foreign presales, co-productions and similar arrangements. There is considerable pressure to use foreign stars, directors, writers, or to shoot part of a production in the financing country. She believed there would be 'very little on Australian television in future that we can point to as truly Australian'.

Deb Richards, ABA Director of Programming Standards, said that she believed that official co-productions would be included as 'Australian' for the purposes of TPS 14. This issue was a major battleground during the ABT Oz content inquiry, and the foreshadowed change would mean that films like *Green Card* and *Map of the Human Heart*, which contain no elements which are culturally relevant to Australia, would count as Australian content.

Perhaps a more appropriate title for the next forum on this subject would be *From Dinosaurs to Digital Compression*.... □