



Indecision surrounds TVNZ privatisation

New Zealand's state-owned television broadcaster, Television New Zealand, is not for sale. Or is it?

Shortly before he was deposed in October this year by Jenny Shipley, former Kiwi prime minister Jim Bolger said that TVNZ might be for sale.

Coalition partner, New Zealand First, led by Winston Peters, seemed to have given Bolger space to explore a TVNZ sell-off.

But in negotiating a coalition agreement with Shipley, Peters indicated that TVNZ would be sold over his dead body – a political U-turn which might get a screening before too much longer given New Zealand First's standing in current opinion polls.

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Communications minister Maurice Williamson told the annual Screen Producers and Directors Association (SPADA) conference in Wellington in November that "Cabinet papers are in train now" for his review of broadcasting policy, but it was likely to be "well into the new year" before they were finalised.

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the broadcasting fee – the compulsory annual tax of NZ\$110 paid by all television set owners – which funds the assistance agency New Zealand On Air (NZOA).

Williamson is looking at the level of the fee, whether it continues to be the best way to pursue the government's broadcasting policy objectives and other issues.

He said there were two separate issues. The first was how the government chose to fund New Zealand culture. The second "totally different thing" was in "owning a business that should be earning profits". He noted that 71 per cent of local programs are funded by advertising alone. Only 29 per cent have government assistance from NZOA.

SPADA president Dave Gibson said it was important not to confuse public service and local content. What he wanted was "a wide variety of local programs across a wide variety of genres across a number of networks".

"I don't want people to just say 'Keep it'. I want them to talk about a vision that's relevant in a modern, multi-channel environment... There's an emotional concept of culture and ownership but people are still dissatisfied with TV," he said.

At TVNZ, Neil Roberts said he was hearing a lot of talk in the community about ownership but he "wasn't hearing anything about getting more money for production". All of the "key drivers" for TVNZ were, he said, local programs.

He confirmed that wholly-owned

TVNZ subsidiary, South Pacific Pictures (SPP), was for sale. SPP makes New Zealand's highly successful local soap, *Shortland Street*. Roberts said he felt ownership of a production division "stands between TVNZ and the creative community".

Also for sale was the Natural History Unit in Dunedin, claimed to be the second most prolific producer of nature programming in the world after the BBC's Bristol unit. Williamson said its output had primarily been directed at the international market in recent years.

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The minister was "very keen on seeing the archive as part of a cultural obligation" and Gibson said SPADA was "absolutely and totally opposed to the sale of the archive".

Alliance spokesperson Pam Corkery said her party opposed the sale of TVNZ, as did 73 per cent of New Zealanders – though she had plenty of problems with the organisation as it stood.

"If there was a 'no arseholes' hiring policy," said Corkery, "it would be a very stripped-down management team."

Jock Given