

National Cultural Policy Submission

Sandy George

Prelude

I'm Australian correspondent for the UK-based *Screen International* and *Screendaily.com*. I've been editor of local trade magazines, film writer for *The Australian* newspaper and the scribe behind hundreds of industry newsletters and reports. I've presented films on SBS TV and regularly host discussions and Q&As at industry events and film festivals. In other words, I know the film and television industry well but not other creative industries, I don't represent one faction and I'm not a practitioner.

That said, I dearly want the industry to succeed. This morning, in Sydney, I woke to the sound of a kookaburra. It filled my heart and so does being absorbed in a high-quality Australian story, told on screen. I have absolutely no doubt that millions of Australians feel the same way.

Election day was the deadline for *Nobody talks about Australianness on our Screens*, a paper I wrote for Currency House. The commission allowed me the opportunity to think deeply about issues of concern. This submission draws from that paper. The first draft is here <https://currencyhouse.org.au/> but if anyone wants to read the full paper, please get in touch for the updated version: Currency's process is to widely seek feedback on a first draft, then revise it before it is published in book form and this link takes you to the first draft only.

I recognise that this call for submissions was for the drafting of a Cultural Policy, but it would be a wasted opportunity not to draw attention to several matters that I believe the Federal Government should act upon immediately.

In Summary

The five pillars of the planned cultural policy are **1) First Nations, 2) a place for every story/diversity, 3) the centrality of the artist, 4) strong institutions and 5) reaching the audience.**

I focus on two matters in particular. The first falls under the reaching audiences pillar: there is most definitely a need to give Australians who love local film and TV more

opportunities to exercise that love, and to increase the links between audiences and the production industry in general. The second is relevant to all five pillars: the screen production industry, supported by industry and government, leans too much towards the commercial rather than the cultural.

Having listened to Minister Tony Burke talk at the townhall meeting at the Esy in St Kilda in August, I will assume that cultural value is more important than economic value – something some producers don't countenance.

Also, I will predominantly refer to Australian drama, which has been subject to market failure and challenges for all its existence and, when it successfully connects with audiences, contains cultural value in spades.

1. Local audiences need to be able to access Australian drama

How should Australian television drama be paid for? Is enough made for it not to be swamped by drama from overseas? How can it compete with US drama shot on vast budgets? These concerns have always affected the ability of Australians to access drama. In the last few years, such concerns have been exacerbated by accelerated globalisation, the tsunami of content that has become available, growing production costs, and the consequences of changed and changing viewing habits.

On the feature film front, blockages that prevent all but a few films from being widely accessible on the big screen across the country remain unaddressed. It is absurd that taxpayers are part funding films they have little hope of seeing.

Also, what's rarely addressed front-on is that unless Australia is recognisable on screen there is no hope of Australian drama connecting to local audiences in that deep way that delivers the kookaburra effect. And the more recognisable it is, the better.

Some of the biggest users of taxpayer funding for screen production have no on-screen Australianness – *Elvis* being the best recent example. Non-Australians, increasingly Americans, are appearing more and more often in television drama – often at the request of financiers. There is an increasingly generic feel to drama worldwide and this is seeping into Australian work. It's not surprising given that the commercial free-to-air networks, which focus on local audiences, have backed off from drama and the streamers, most of which are owned by big international conglomerates, are stepping forward. Government

and industry is complicit in this because the significant Australian content (SAC) test – the gateway for accessing both the Producer Offset (PO) and Screen Australian funding – is worded in a way that places just as much importance on which producers and production companies are making a production as it does on what a production is going to look like on screen.

And by the way, please don't read anything parochial – desert, kangaroos, diggers – into the word Australianness because it can be a million things, and don't assume great local stories dripping with Australianness are not being told. Some of the best drama on our screens in recent years has had strong indigenous themes (*Total Control*, *Mystery Road*, *Sweet As*), explored important issues (*Fires*, *Blaze*), had ethnic, sexual and social diversity at their heart (*Here Out West*, *Of An Age*) and told modern, urban stories (*Babyteeth*).

Australians are given no help, in an overall sense, to find out when and where new local drama is appearing. They only hear about individual dramas via word of mouth or if they're in the path of a publicity and marketing campaign. In the digital age, this is madness. I get texts when shops have sales. It's crazy that I can't sign up to a service that notifies me whenever a new series premieres or a new film opens.

It is now necessary to systematically foster a community of supporters centred on a website, an app, a social media group or all of the above. A text service would just be one aspect. Film and television is seen as sexy and sparks curiosity. Harness that.

Right now, there are Australians gagging to see RackaRacka's debut film *Talk to Me*, others the sequel to *The Newsreader*. Offer incentives for them to share their passion with friends and family. Picture the marketing value of fan-led events being held across the country on the night of release. Invite the many who always watch for Australian film and television, to get involved on an ongoing basis. Act on the lessons that can be learned from the remarkable popularity of Australian films at festivals. The overall impact could be phenomenal. Perhaps distributors, online platforms and television networks could help meet some of the ongoing costs of such a community in exchange for accessing the mailing list. Perhaps a big corporate player—a bank, insurance company or health fund with clients/customers/members across the country—might see the value of helping to drive this initiative.

“Reaching the audience” is one of the five pillars of the cultural policy and rightly so. Another is “a place for every story/diversity”. Minister Burke cited *Alex & Eve* and *Hearts*

and Bones at the Espy as examples of Australian films that reflect his area of Western Sydney. Good on him, but most Australians would never have heard of those films, let alone had the opportunity to find or see them.

Recommendations for the cultural policy: *put as much effort and resources into encouraging local access to the output of the creative industries as goes into producing those outputs, as that's the only way **audience reach (pillar 5)** will be achieved; **make the artist central (pillar 3)** providing that artist prioritises culture over business.*

Other recommendations related to film and television: *appropriately regulate the streamers; look afresh at the regulation of commercial free-to-air networks; impose quotas on ABC TV and SBS TV – or ask them to self-impose quotas – and ensure they have the funding to meet those quotas; plan a strategy for all online and social media platforms; consider quotas in cinemas; request that Screen Australia address the blockages in cinemas, especially for smaller films; request that Screen Australia review the SAC test.*

2. The lean towards cultural value over economic is misplaced

Some matters already raised indicate or imply a leaning towards economic over cultural value. It is in the interests of producers to satisfy streamers now and the sweet spot for those streamers is attracting both local and global audiences, for example. The nature of the SAC test elevates the importance of the production community over the public's cultural needs in an environment where Australian content is increasingly difficult to find – and has to be paid for more often.

In addition, after being in place for nearly 15 years and big changes in the landscape, cracks are obvious in the current funding regime: there is confusion around its operation; it is wrong that selected foreign television productions, using the Location Offset/Location Incentive combination, can access the same level of federal tax rebates as Australian television production using the Producer Offset; a significant loophole in the Production, Digital and Visual Effects (PDV) Offset allows reality shows, which aren't subject to market failure, to get tax deductions; and there is too much Ministerial discretion in the Location Incentive and too much fuss made of foreign production compared to local. The

whole shebang needs to be looked at in a holistic way that puts cultural value first. Why else should production get public money?

Screen Australia, with its separate pot of money, says it considers the cultural value of projects that apply for finance under its main funding programs. But this is done quietly and is only one factor in their decision making. The agency must prioritise and lead on cultural value. In mid-2022, \$4 million in grants went to games developers under the Expansion Pack initiative and there was no necessity for the games to have “Australian themes”. The health of Australian production is often obfuscated by being mixed in with offshore production and/or by being examined chiefly through an economic lens. Having strong institutions, one of the pillars, is not enough: they also have to strongly advocate for culture.

The current interest from non-Indigenous audiences in Indigenous-themed Indigenous-made content was built from nothing over decades. It had nothing to do with economic development and everything to do with developing the nation. Quite deliberate decisions by bureaucrats to resource Indigenous practitioners to tell Indigenous stories were made and the drama they produced changed society for the better. Similar ambitious initiatives need to be adopted by Screen Australia so that local film and television is a genuine reflection of Australia’s diversity. That way, there will indeed be a place for every story. Revel in what’s possible.

Recommendation for the cultural policy: *keep up the focus on First Nations stories told by first nations people (pillar 1), because that work is far from complete; use that model to quicken the pace on telling genuinely diverse stories (pillar 2); emphasize that exceptional cultural value is the key driver behind the government’s support of the creative industries, especially when it comes to the government agencies because **it is not enough that institutions are strong (pillar 4), they also must value culture above all else.***

Other recommendations related to film and television: *request that Screen Australia review all programs and actions through the lens of exceptional cultural value; clarify the policy objectives of each of the financial incentives in place for production and institute the changes that will make them fit for purpose.*