

# Communications Update

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## Official: DTC Not Philistines

**"I have heard it said that my Department is not concerned with cultural aspects - only with technology.**

**I can assure you that we are interested in all facets of broadcasting and fully understand the importance of broadcasting as a cultural influence....**

**The emerging challenge facing Australia will be to determine the future cultural role of broadcasting in the expected multi-service environment."**

Jaws dropped at the recent 1993 Australian Broadcasting Summit in Sydney (IIR Conferences) when this statement issued from none other than Tony Shaw, head of the Broadcasting Policy Division of the Department of Transport and Communications.

It was an astonishing turnaround from a Department where people like Shaw and his colleague Chris North have epitomised the 'dry' approach to broadcasting policy. Only recently, Shaw had left an impression in meetings with industry and public interest groups that the Department did not see culture as one of its concerns.

It was Tony Shaw and Chris North who presided over the introduction of the Broadcasting Services Act, an Act in which cultural considerations took a back seat behind objectives like maximising services, stimulating competition and encouraging 'consumer sovereignty'. The only mandatory program standards which remain for existing broadcasters, Australian content and children's programs, are probably there as much for political reasons (ie a perception by Parliament that the public would not wear their elimination) as for cultural reasons.

There are a number of possible explanations for this change of emphasis. One is the ascendancy of Senator Bob McMullan, Minister for Arts and Administrative Services, who is in the process of preparing a national cultural policy and has made it clear that in future, no cabinet decision with cultural implications in any portfolio will be free from scrutiny against this policy.

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Another possibility is fear of the lurking spectre of some kind of administrative merger of the arts and communications, a proposal which has been strongly promoted by the increasingly influential arts lobby. Although not adopted as policy by the Government, the idea is still very much alive in some quarters.

But perhaps the new approach simply flows from a re-reading of the Act, where as Shaw pointed out in his paper, Section 3 embodies cultural objectives for the broadcasting system. He noted that, as implementation progresses, the Department intends 'to monitor the Act to enable the Government to assess whether its policy intentions behind each of the provisions are being fully met'. In this context, he said that the arrangements to deliver cultural objectives are an area of 'particular interest'.

Whatever the reasons, it seems clear that there has been a significant change of heart in Canberra, which has been clear to anyone alert to the public statements of the Prime Minister, most recently at the AFI awards. After a period when the markets were king, there is an emerging recognition of the central importance to a country like Australia with its relatively small population and fragile stage of cultural development, of a strong local production industry and guaranteed outlets for its product, particularly through broadcast services.

## The Broadcasting Into Arts Push

Asked what he saw as the advantage of keeping broadcasting within the Communications portfolio as opposed to going to Arts, Shaw said that broadcasting touched on multiple objectives including industry policy, competition, diversity, as well as issues of Australian identity. Broadcasting is not just about content but also about technology, he said. He agreed that consistency between the Acts was necessary but said that a single agency could not

be expected to have 100 per cent of the policy advice function for broadcasting. His department could contribute to the debate about how the cultural objective is achieved through broadcasting legislation. It would be 'a shame' to split the regulation of technology between two agencies as we move into a new era of multimedia.

## Consumer Protection, Too

It seems that the DTC's concern for matters directly affecting Australian viewers and listeners extends also to the issue of consumer protection. Shaw noted that the emergence of commercial applications for new cable technologies, interactive and multi-channel services and their implications for consumer protection and competing service provision would 'require continuing attention' through the channels of consumer protection legislation and trade practices law.

In the new multiple service environment it would be important, he said, to sift the genuine public policy interest from claims based on the quest for sectional or commercial benefit.

## Community Broadcasters Watch Out!

Community broadcasters may need to watch their backs in the evolving multi-service environment. Tony Shaw said that their role 'may need to be reassessed if the diversity and choice provided by new service types results in services which occupy "niches" currently served by local community stations'.

It is difficult to imagine any commercial provider of niche services choosing to supply the services currently offered by the great majority of community stations. While these stations attract a modest level of local sponsorship and some subscriber sup-

port, no more than a handful could survive as stand-alone services funded by advertising or subscriptions, given the nature of their programs and also their audiences.

Nevertheless, coming from such a source this statement must be viewed seriously, and it is unfortunate that it comes at a time when the body which represents the sector's interests, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, is battling to keep afloat financially.

## A Review-filled Future

Shaw concluded by stating a view that the plethora of current reviews of aspects of telecommunications, radiocommunications and the information industries could be as important to broadcasting as any review with broadcasting in its title. Both the BTCE Communications Futures Project and the report of the Broadband Services Group would feed into other planned reviews, including the review of the television industry and the review of the operation of Australian content requirements for subscription television.

He saw social policy (eg equity, privacy, copyright, cultural issues) as one of two key areas where regulatory issues are likely to emerge, the other being competition policy/market structure. □

*NOTE: Because of space restrictions, further coverage of this conference is held over till the next issue of CU.*

