



CREATIVE STATEMENT

Australia's cultural community has been waiting for a cultural policy statement through the Incumbencies of nine Communications Ministers and two Prime Ministers.

The process culminated at last in the document *Creative Nation*, which was finally written not within the Department of Communications and the Arts, as might have been expected, but within the Prime Minister's own office.

While this may be taken as a positive sign of the Prime Minister's personal commitment to cultural concerns, it has resulted in a document which is not a cultural policy statement in the sense that it was intended to be when the process was set in motion.

Previous Minister Bob McMullan had a clear idea of what *he* thought it was to be: a statement of the Government's overall cultural objectives for Australia

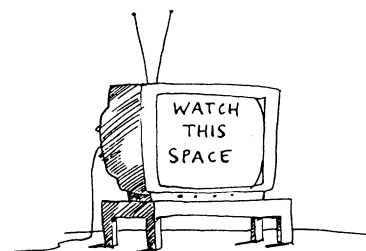
against which the cultural implications of any Government decision could be measured - for, as McMullan pointed out, there are very few decisions, social or economic, which do not ultimately have a cultural impact.

In the event, the statement is a sort of shopping list of rewards and promises for those within the cultural community - such as the artists who supported the Government at the last election, and the Australia Council - on whom the Government's eye has fallen favourably, with a consequent downgrading of those like the ABC which are out of favour.

It is also an attempt on the part of the Government to place Australia at the cutting edge of new technology, particularly in providing content for interactive multi-media. The emphasis on content issues is commendable, but there is little indication of how the objectives are

to be achieved other than by throwing a large amount of money at multimedia development.

Many of the initiatives in *Creative Nation* represent a shift towards the concept of culture as an industry. There is an emphasis on the provision of industry assistance, as in manufacturing or primary industry, away from the encouragement of cultural objectives through other means, such as education or (in broadcasting) regulation. Barry Melville pursues this point in the following article on the commercial television production fund announced in the statement.



New Fund Favours Direct Production Industry Assistance

Last financial year, the commercial television industry was well into recovery after the excesses of the 1980s - posting a \$112m profit. Despite this, the Government - in the name of Australian culture - has elected to shore up declining network expenditure on select categories of television programs.

The Prime Minister's *Creative Nation* statement earmarks \$60m for an Australian Commercial Television Production Fund, intended to encourage production of drama (features, telemovies and miniseries), children's drama and documentaries. The production fund is additional to existing Government production assistance through the AFC and the FFC, and the programs it funds will not count towards the existing Australian content requirements.

In its final form as announced, the fund's use by commercial television licensees is limited to a maximum of

50 per cent, with the remainder to be channelled to Australian independent producers. This approach has mitigated earlier fears on the part of the independent production industry - based mainly on rumours about the proposed fund - that the main beneficiaries would be the networks themselves and the largest and best-established production houses.

After four years the current Australian content standard has been met, but it has not stemmed declining investment by the networks in high-budget one-off production.

So while the commercial television industry shifts its expenditure into cheaper high-volume programming like sports coverage and 'infotainment' the Government has chosen direct investment rather than tighter regulation to boost high quality drama, children's programs and documentaries.

The *Creative Nation* statement marks a significant swing away from

industry *regulation* in the public interest towards industry *assistance* in the name of national cultural development. While the move is in line with the overall thrust towards competition and minimal regulatory intervention, the central plank of Australian content regulation has always been cultural policy, not industry protection. This is an important distinction in the face of international free trade pressures under the GATT, which precludes industry protection but allows cultural assistance.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a combination of regulation and production assistance resulted in the production and screening of unprecedented levels of quality Australian television programs. The film and television production industry in Australia has been largely sustained by direct production assistance (through agencies like the

Continued on page 4 ...