



Minister Strong On OZ Content

Screenwriter Tony Morphett must sometimes regret that he didn't copyright a remark he made at an ABT conference in 1988.

It was about the non-negotiability of Australian culture and the need for Australians to 'dream our own dreams', and it seems to be quoted whenever the issue of Australian content comes up. Recently Communications Minister Michael Lee recycled it in a speech to the conference on the future of broadcast programming.

The Minister's speech, which foreshadowed the release of the ABA's discussion paper on the review of TPS14, was notable for its strong support for the sentiment Morphett was expressing and for Australian content regulation (ABA take note). He said among other things that

...if we do not focus on the need for Australian content rules, then I believe we do run the very real risk of being swamped by overseas, and in particular, American programming..... It is only through Australian content requirements that we can be confident that Australian children 'dream Australian dreams', see Australian actors and hear Australian voices on their film and television screens.

The Minister also said encouraging excellence in Australian programming was 'one of the most important ways of fostering and protecting Australian culture'.

He said that increased competition from pay TV and other services would give the free-to-air broadcasters an opportunity 'to rise to the programming challenge'; that this should not be simply a matter of Government policy; and that the industry itself must accept some responsibility in meeting the demands of audiences. He hoped that by the year 2000 prime time viewing on free-to-air would be predominantly Australian content; a hope that anyone with a view of Australian tel-

evision history and a knowledge of industry economics might regard as something of a pipe dream.

With an optimism not yet tempered by the realities of the job, Lee said he had no doubt that the introduction of the new services would result in 'an enormous growth in diversity and excellence of programming'.

The Minister conceded that there had been some 'rough edges' in regulation which, continuing the metaphor, 'we have all been working to bevel'. He mentioned narrowcasting in this context as a specific area where 'difficulties' had been encountered (see *CU* 99). He reiterated the intent of the Act in the area of narrowcasting, saying that narrowcasters are not permitted to duplicate commercial or community broadcasting services, and can be subjected to substantial fines and complaints mechanisms. He thus avoided the tricky question of drawing the line between the various services and deciding what exactly constitutes a narrowcasting service.

A questioner flagged another potential trouble spot when he asked the Minister how the requirement for 10 per cent expenditure on Australian programs would be monitored and what criteria would be used.

The Minister neatly threw that ball back into the ABA's court, and indeed the day's chair, Deb Richards of the ABA, said that the ABA had released guidelines on this issue. Lee said that realistically, the amounts involved in the 10 per cent would be a lot less than expenditure by the free-to-air broadcasters, but pointed out that the legislation allows for an increase to 20 per cent in 1997, subject to a review of feasibility. □

Stop Press: As *CU* went to press the ABA released its discussion paper on the review of Australian content on commercial television. *CU*'s analysis will appear in the next issue.

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**Ms Gil Appleton
Editor
Communications Update**

Dear Gil

RE: COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE - 100TH EDITION

I understand that the release of the 100th edition of "Communications Update" is fast approaching.

On behalf of the Members and staff of the Australian Broadcasting Authority, I extend my congratulations to you and your team for producing a journal of such consistently high quality.

I am sure that "Communications Update" will continue to stimulate debate on issues crucial to the communications world well into its next century.

***Yours sincerely
Brian Johns
Chairman
Australian Broadcasting Authority***