

Communications

Update

A Monthly Round-Up of Media and Communications

Issue 97 • March 1994



Joy Restrained Over Arts/Communications Merger

Barely three months after the merger of the Departments of Arts and Communications was announced, there is considerable concern about its implementation and effects among 'client' organisations, arts bureaucrats and people in the wider arts community.

These people believe this move was urged on an extremely receptive Prime Minister before the last election by an arts lobby with a limited knowledge of history, or understanding of the workings of Canberra. A particular concern is that the number of avenues to arts and production funding will diminish, instead of there being a dynamic, diverse and pluralist approach.

Mark Armstrong, speaking as Director of Melbourne's Centre for Media & Telecommunications Law and Policy as well as ABC Chairman, told *CU* that problems could conceivably occur down the track if merging the great range of arts and communications bodies started to produce uniformity. 'The reason for Australia's spectacular success in cultural industries, film and broadcasting has been the diversity of funding sources and of insights and initiatives, while uniformity stifles creativity', he said - though he saw no indication that the Government is going to 'impose uniformity'.

On the face of it, a positive aspect of the merger is that the ABC - widely seen as our single most important cultural body - will be within a portfolio with a strong cultural focus instead of sitting uneasily among the largely technological concerns of the former Department of Transport and Communications.

Mark Armstrong praised the merger for 'focusing attention on the content and creative side of audiovisual industries and the arts, as opposed to the old thinking which conceived of broadcasting as being all about transmission'. Armstrong said that all over the world, not just in Australia, governments are recognising the importance of programs, films and software.

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But others who spoke to *CU* expressed fears that the ABC's appropriation of \$500m plus, however well deserved, might start to look over-generous to some of the hungry smaller cultural organisations which are the responsibility of the Arts area.

There is no doubt that the ABC has been able to use the funding bodies within the Arts portfolio as an alternative source of production funds, additional to its appropriation through Communications. For instance, the FFC has been a major investor in ABC drama series, and the Australia Council has supported the arts program, *Review*. The concern is that such funding within one portfolio could be regarded as 'double-dipping' and as such, would be in breach of established Government practice as enforced by the Department of Finance. The effect on ABC television drama in particular could be devastating.

The ABC has no official view on the merger. A spokesperson told *CU* that it was not appropriate for the ABC to express a view on administrative arrangements. Privately, ABC sources suggest that the Corporation is taking a 'wait and see' line. There is some concern however that financial links within the new department which were once not highly visible may become more apparent.

CU understands that a longstanding SBS proposal for substantial funds to be committed to local multicultural drama production over a three year period was on the point of being approved before the merger. Supportive bureaucrats from the former Arts department are keen to see this go ahead, but the merger has put all such major initiatives on hold.

An SBS spokesperson told *CU* that it was obvious that SBS relied heavily on the independent sector and therefore on the funding authorities, and it was seen as vital that they had some 'seeding money' to generate programs in the future if they are to reach an adequate level of local production.

Surprise Move

The December merger under new Minister Michael Lee took many people by surprise.

The prevailing view had been that if the Government were going to make this move, they would have done it immediately after last year's election. It was believed that Arts Minister Bob McMullan favoured the merger, which had been strongly pushed by the arts community.

Whatever the reasons for the sudden change of heart, the Government's move may, in the long term, prove to be one of its most important and far-reaching policy decisions.

Probably because it happened at the start of the media 'silly season', reaction to the December announcement of the merger was muted. It carries, however, profound implications for Australia's continuing cultural development, by combining under one umbrella the responsibility for the rapidly converging technologies of broadcasting and

communications, along with film and television production, literature, performing and visual arts, galleries and museums, and heritage.

If it works - and this is a big 'if' - the merger should at the very least ensure that decisions about the carriage, type and number of services to Australia's viewing and listening audiences will no longer be made without due consideration of their cultural impact.

An important aspect of the merger is that the process of developing a statement of cultural policy, which has been in train for some years and looked set to come to fruition under McMullan, will now be completed in an environment possibly more conducive to acknowledging the central role of broadcasting in the Australian way of life and thus our cultural development. The downside is that the statement, which is intended to ensure consideration of the cultural impact of all Cabinet decisions, will be delayed even further, probably until at least August.

Not an Easy Ride

There is no reason to expect that the merging of Arts and Communications, will be easy.

A senior officer from the communications area conceded to *CU* that they might not have been 'as attuned to the arts and cultural dimensions' as they could have. The widely-held idea that the department had run its own agenda in the last few years was incorrect. The officer said that they would much rather have a strong minister who made the running on policy.

Whatever the truth of this, the sense of relief among Communications people at the departure of Bob Collins is palpable. Perceptions of the new Minister are that, despite his electrical engineering background, his inclination is towards the cultural aspects of the portfolio. He remains an unknown quantity, however, having not yet been called on to make any major decisions. Looming issues like local content and the Closer Economic Relations (CER) agreement with New Zealand will provide an opportunity to see where he is coming from.

Before the merger, the Arts bureaucrats were preparing a memorandum for Cabinet on the CER issue. The former Minister, Bob McMullan, is now in the Trade portfolio and there is considerable speculation about whether he will remain committed to the Arts line in his new incarnation.

At the workface level, if there is a view of Communications in the Arts area, it is as a hotbed of rabid technocrat philistines, while in Communications an extreme view would be that arts bureaucrats are airy-fairy and unrealistic, with no understanding of technology and a belief that program regulation and generous production subsidies are the answer to everything.

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These stereotypes are clearly exaggerated, but the fact remains that the two departments represent two distinct cultures. A Ministerial staffer who has frequently dealt with the Department of the Arts voiced a widely-held concern that the merger involved a strong department (Communications) taking over a weak one, and observed that the bedding down problems were already significant.

Communications sources within the new department told *CU* that there were resentments in some areas and that there had been some 'disappointing reactions' to the merger. The sources recalled that it had taken three years for the earlier merger of Transport and Communications to 'shake down' (Transport has now moved on to its own ministry), and there would be a similar need now to get rid of 'the other side of the department' mentality. 'If the department was going to be re-cast, this move makes as much sense as any other', one source said.

CU understands that most people are making an effort to keep day-to-day relations amicable, but so far, there has been little or no cross-fertilisation beyond a senior officers weekly meeting. There has been some temporary tinkering with the corporate plan and the strategy for the portfolio for the purposes of the budget, but the process of a major revision has not begun. Arts sources told *CU* that they are attaching a separate arts viewpoint to all Ministerial briefs.

Much will depend on key decisions, like re-structuring, and where the department will be housed. The whole department is not expected to be under the same roof until at least the end of this year.

Wrangling is going on with the Department of Finance about a new top structure, and Arts officers are worried about the fate of their boss, the competent and well-liked Cathy Santamaria, who remains Acting Deputy Secretary in the Arts area. Her opposite number in Communications is Mike Hutchinson, the driest of the dries.

All branches have had to produce 'synergy' papers, the intention being

that there should be total integration between the two areas. One departmental (arts) source told *CU* that the Minister favours full integration as a way of ensuring that it would be difficult for a future government to 'disintegrate' the arts and isolate it again. While this is a commendable intention, it may also be a sign of the Minister's inexperience. There is a strong feeling in some quarters, both among 'client' organisations and within the arts bureaucracy, that the Arts area should remain identifiable and distinct from Communications within the overall structure.

On a positive note, former ALP minister and (in opposition) arts spokesperson Susan Ryan praised the appointment of Neville Stevens, formerly head of Industry, Technology and Regional Development to head the new department. She told *CU* that the arts lobby had long argued that the arts should be seen as an industry making a major contribution to the economy, and Stevens could be influential in raising the profile of the arts in this regard.

Footnotes

- Proponents of an over-arching arts/communications mega-department have often looked with favour to Canada, where for many years the Department of Communications was responsible for all aspects of broadcasting and culture. Ironically, Canada last year moved away from this model as part of an effort by then Prime Minister Kim Campbell to reduce the size of ministries. A new 'ragbag' department, Heritage Canada, combines the arts, heritage, culture and some broadcasting responsibilities of the former department with areas like multiculturalism, official languages, sport, national parks and even some aspects of corporate and consumer affairs. Technological aspects of communications have been divided between the minis-

tries of Science and Technology and Industry and Trade, in what one observer described as 'a more conservative conception of the lack of interlinkages between issues'. There are no signs that the new government will change this approach.

- One odd outcome of the merger is that responsibility for the departmental 'think tank', the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics, is now split between the two separated departments, an arrangement which could prove an administrative nightmare. It is not known yet whether the new regime will look with favour on Chris Cheah's team working on the major BTCE Communications Futures Project (see *CU* 92).
- For those who are historically minded, an analogy might be drawn between the grafting together of the arts and communications bureaucracy and the ABC's absorbing in 1964 of engineering staff from the old PMG's department. The clash between freewheeling program makers, representing the intellectual capital of the organisation, and engineers, with their strong orientation to technical matters and broadcast standards, affected the ABC adversely for many years and gave rise to longstanding industrial relations problems. It is to be hoped that the current merger has more positive results.... □

