

Once were Anzacs

Writer, producer and Kiwi Roger Simpson argues for the Australian production industry in a speech delivered to the True Blue rally at the Sydney Opera House on June 21

I'm a Kiwi. I still barrack for the All Blacks although I've been in Australia now for 27 years. I'm a complete and utter Kiwiphile with a beauty-bonza bias. I like New Zealand carpets, New Zealand honey and white wine from Marlborough. And I could not contain my mirth when the lights went out in Auckland - deluding myself, like everyone else, that it was all because of privatisation and that it couldn't happen here...

Apart from the Kiwis' ingenuity with cricket (not an easy game to play in tramping boots and Swanee) the New Zealander is almost identical to the Australian. The two major cities hate each other, the welfare system is in slow collapse, farmers are marginalised, teachers devalued, bankers unregulated and QCs (in the name of justice, mind) are all obscenely rich. Medical specialists gorge themselves on a healthcare system in the last throes of life while only 1.5 corporate criminals are in jail for the obscenities of the 1980s. It's almost impossible to tell the two countries apart.

Except for one significant and defining difference. Australia has quotas for television and New Zealand hasn't.

I arrived in Australia in 1971 to write cop shows for Hector Crawford and found myself in the midst of a campaign that was marching in the streets. "TV Make It Australia" they called it and make it Australia we did. (How quickly the Kiwi adapts). This was the birth of the modern renaissance, Gorton and Gough in bipartisan union, the beginnings of government support for film. The ABC was in its ascendance, the Film School was born, Father Phillip Adams was our spiritual leader and Don Dunstan gave us the first of the State Corporations.

Wake In Fright and *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie*, *Sunday Too Far Away* and *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, *Power Without Glory* and *Rush and Marion*, and on the commercial networks, the first of our mini-series - *Against The Wind*. A careful mix of government subsidy and incentive and quotas without which there would be no Bruce Beresford or Reg Grundy or Geoffrey Rush.

So why, after all that has been achieved, am I so incensed by the High Court decision to give New Zealanders access to Australian quota? Not anger with the legal system, for the rarefied debate is really beside the point, but anger and disappointment with my former countrymen for seeking to appropriate from us what they have failed to achieve for themselves - a viable film and television industry with a national voice and an international reputation.

The entire commercial television industry in Australia is underpinned by quotas. Quotas make the channels buy locally for many times the cost of foreign. They provide jobs and foreign exchange and a national voice. Quotas support an industry that is truly international. Our soaps are the best in the world, our cinematographers an export commodity. Judy Davis starred in a mini-series, *Water Under The Bridge*, that would not have happened

without quotas. And Peter Weir wouldn't have got to direct *Luke's Kingdom* if quotas had not been in place. Marcus Graham would not be in the U.S. now making a pilot for American television had it not been for quotas and Kylie Minogue would never have been noticed without the quotas that launched her career.

Meanwhile, across the ditch in Godzone, as we Kiwis once fondly called it, there are no quotas and nothing to crow about. The largest employers are *Hercules* and *Xena*, American offshore productions that sop up the last of the talent that hasn't followed Jane Campion to Oz. The national broadcaster no longer has a drama department and has recently sold its production arm to private enterprise. The industry, if we can call it that, is on its knees.

So what do the Kiwis do? Copy Australian experience and introduce incentives? No. Establish a definition of New Zealandness (to mirror our own Australianness definition) to give local programs a fighting chance against dumped foreign product? No. Build and nurture a strong local industry to reflect a nations sensibilities? No. They try to piggyback on ours.

By seeking to access Australian quota, the New Zealanders admit defeat. Their cause is lost, the Americans have landed, their industry is no longer worth the struggle. So much energy, so many lawyers' bills, so much heat and dust has been expended on CER, the Closer Economic Relations Treaty that declares anything New Zealand as Australian - and vice versa (at last my Australian born sons can play for the All Blacks) - that the Kiwis have forgotten what they were fighting for; not a piece of our industry - but one of their own. <

Roger Simpson is a multi-award winning writer and producer and the creator of the *Hallfax f.p.* series of telemovies and the series *Good Guys*, *Bad Guys*