

pose as being to promote "economic and technological regulation to the minimum extent necessary". The DOC's policy prescriptions for the new narrowcast technologies are consistent with that objective. Unfortunately the legislative framework within which it seeks to administer that policy is proving an increasing clumsy instrument. Self-regulation by service providers may work. However, communications legislation should be revised to ensure that such regulation as is required has the effective sanction of law and public accountability without, where inappropriate, the cumbersome machinery of the Broadcasting Act.

Peter G. Leonard

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LIFE AFTER THE FDU TELEVISION AND  
FDU RADIO REPORTS

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PART 2

You will have gathered that I am generally much happier with the quality of the approach taken in the FDU Radio Report although that is probably not the view of Janet Cameron from the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters who is scheduled to address you next. The point surely is, however, that irrespective of one's position, it is nevertheless grossly unfair to have restructured these two related industries on the basis of such profoundly divergent philosophical approaches to what, in any case, has been a shifting series of emphases in Government policy.

One needs also, in the context of television, to ask whether the proposed new ownership rules offer the slightest prospect of enhancing the qualitative diversity of program choice in the way contemplated in the FDU Radio Report. It has generally been argued by the Government that the development of new networks would result in economies of scale which would lead to more competitive programming. The evidence so far is to the contrary: Fairfax has dumped a group of Melbourne-based productions in favour of relays of Sydney-made equivalents. Premier Cain is unimpressed. I suspect the Minister is too.

But there is here an even more fundamental issue. Initially, the restructuring of television was undertaken with a view to providing additional services in regional Australia to meet the Government's first policy priority of giving consumers a diversity of choice. The proposed changes to the ownership rules will, however, have their impact ultimately upon all free-to-air commercial television services. To that extent the Government has an obligation to ensure that genuine diversity of choice - and in my view that must mean a qualitative diversity of choice - is achieved across all channels in all markets. And I do not believe the FDU Television Report and all that has flowed

from it will achieve that result.

That is why I and a number of others have been arguing so long, so patiently and with quite exemplary politeness, for serious consideration to be given to the creation of an Australian commercial television narrowcaster, something along the lines of the British Channel Four, to complement the existing commercial sector and bring to it a fresh and desperately needed additional growth dynamic.

We know there is a frequency remaining in each of the cities; we know, from the submission of the Association of National Advertisers to the Richardson Committee that there is commercial enthusiasm for this type of service; we know that the IOBA tax shelter will be letting in the rain increasingly as the personal tax margins come down and that something will have to be done for the independent production sector; and, not least, we know that private investors would leap at such a proposal. The restructuring now going on will shape our free-to-air media services until the end of the century. It would be a national tragedy if we were to pass up this option at this time.

A brighter spot for Mr Duffy, I think, has been in commercial radio where the Government's preference is for new independents to provide the additional regional services. The first cabs off the rank are to be Geelong, the Gold Coast, Gosford and Shepparton and there's to be an announcement later this year on Ipswich. In addition there are 10 new services planned for 1988 and 10 more for 1989. That is not to say there won't be continuing dispute over the supplementary licensing and AM/FM conversion issues, but at least the whole process has not yet been bottlenecked into a Senate Committee inquiry.

Looking over the equalisation process I couldn't help remarking, in preparing this address, just how similarly rocky and subject to political intervention has been the SBS' road towards and then away from structural reform: an inquiry announced in 1983 and commitment to corporation

status and separate charter in March 1986 abandoned four months later in the budget context in favour of amalgamation with the ABC. The amalgamation is then choked off in the Senate, sent off to another committee and now, apparently abandoned as an option by the Government.

That decision, of course, has the whiff of the election about it as, increasingly, will everything else. Indeed, I don't think there's much point speaking to this general topic "Life After the FDU Report" without adding the rider "and the Federal Election".

I happen to believe that politically the question of media policy is still quite a hot one. Irrespective of how ordinary citizens may perceive the Government's handling of the television and print ownership affair, the private media interests directly affected are likely to behave, in the run up to this election, in ways which they believe will advance or protect their positions. This is particularly the case since the legislation which will set these changes in concrete is not yet law. The lobbying and the pressure will be intense and a whole new ledger of political and media creditors and debtors will be created. If the Government changes or there is a shift in the numbers or the balance of power in the Senate the whole wretched thing could finish up back in the melting pot.

Nevertheless, I am prepared to hazard the following few guesses at media life after the FDU Reports and the election.

On ownership and control I think the 75% audience cap with some cross-media restrictions will survive and be enacted. I also think it's possible some level of accommodation could be reached with Fairfax over HSV-7 and The Age.

A phased form of regional equalisation will probably go ahead but not before the Opposition parties have had their much postponed media policy crisis. Fully competitive services in aggregated markets will probably be delayed but not averted. RTA may still wring a few minor concessions from the system

There is a possibility that a new

television service could be established or an existing one, possibly the SBS, may be enhanced to deliver a wider range of special interest programs on a Channel Four or semi-commercial basis.

A secondary market shakeout of commercial TV network properties will occur in the medium term with the sellers sustaining some hefty losses. That will be followed by the much more serious business of stitching the more profitable regional markets into the network ownership.

Pay-TV on a DBS basis will follow the launch of the second generation of AUSSAT satellites due to start in 1991, only four years from now. Aspiring new players looking for large profits here should study the Canadian experience carefully.

The development of new regional radio services will proceed successfully and applications for additional new metropolitan FM licences could be called, possibly within the life of the next Parliament.

The publicly-funded broadcasting sector will be submitted to an inquiry similar to that into the funding of the BBC in the United Kingdom carried out by Professor Alan Peacock and his committee. The Australian inquiry will reach very similar conclusions. Significant changes to the role,

structure and financing of the ABC and SBS, if it still functioning as now, will be recommended. But action will then be postponed until after the next election.

There is, of course, a much wider cultural question which, it seems to me, all too few people bother to ask in the context of "Life after the FDU Reports - after the Election". It is, quite simply this: will the programs on all these services be any better or more diverse?

I must confess that on the balance of the evidence, I am not persuaded that they will. I find myself increasingly tending to the view of a very senior member of the present Federal Cabinet who suggested to me only a matter of weeks ago that Australians are, by and large, a "low-spirited people". That is not a kind assessment so close to the celebration of our Bicentennial. But, in the priorities which we appear to have established for ourselves in the restructuring and administration of our media - those mercurial cultural mirrors of the post-industrial state - I regret to say that I believe the chances are high that that assessment will be proved to be true.

Huw Evans