

Address to Australasian Sound Recording Association

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I want to talk to you about the mechanics and the actual rationale of the integration between the AFC and ScreenSound Australia; what the AFC does and who we are; state our commitment to the core functions of the Film and Sound Archives; state in the context of ASRA, which has a focus in the area of sound, our commitment to a process of consultation; and give you an idea where we are going to be heading over the next six months in what is going to be quite complex, difficult and sensitive.

The announcement about the integration was made as part of the Federal budget on 13 May 2003. The actual recommendation for the integration came out of the government's review of cultural institutions. In some quarters too much emphasis is being placed on that, because the review of cultural institutions in many respects was a review about administrative issues and financial issues and in particular, issues to do with depreciation surrounding the national collecting institutions.

This decision was outside of some of those financial decisions we've made as part of this review, and at the end of the day was the major outcome of this review. It was very much a policy-based decision. It was not a decision about administrative rationality or issues about cost-cutting. It came out of a considered policy base on the one hand, about what is the most effective organisational structure to deliver a national film and sound archive, and to deliver it as a cultural institution. On the other hand, once you make that decision, where do you place it and how do you structure the organisation.

I'm sure some of you are aware that there has been a debate going on within the film, broadcasting, television, sound and archiving community about the role and the structure of the Film and Sound Archive and particular aspects of it. While the government's decision to integrate the organisations seemed to come out of left field, the context in which that decision was made has always been there and there's been a lot of discussion around it.

One of the key elements of all of that, something that the archive community and the Film and Sound Archive itself has been arguing for a long while, was that the institution should exist outside of a government department, and that its lack of institutional status was an impediment to the proper exercise and delivery of its functions.

Some have argued that the Film and Sound Archive should exist as an entity in its own right. The AFC has contributed to the debate around the work of the archives and has made it known within its own area of operation, to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, and to the government.

The AFC has argued that the Film and Sound Archive is part of a broader area of cultural activity and that it should operate within a broader industry context. It could

not exist appropriately within the structure of a government department. The AFC felt very comfortable with the idea that it should exist within an existing cultural institution such as the AFC.

A result of the decision to integrate the archives into the AFC is that the government for the first time has enshrined the archives' function in legislation, *The Australian Film Commission Amendment Act 2003*. There was quite significant work done by the department, with input from the AFC and the archives about the way that the function of archiving the nation's audiovisual heritage was dealt with. The AFC believes that that function has now been located and placed within one of the country's most important and established cultural institutions, the Australian Film Commission.

As chief executive of this organisation, it appears to me that in the debate since 13 May the focus has been lost of just what the AFC is, what it stands for and what its achievements are. There's been a focus on the AFC's lack of connection with the sound part of the archives function. Whilst that is understandable, in the broader debate the focus on that lack of connection with the practice of archiving and particularly sound, has gone on without due attention being paid to the credentials that the AFC does have.

The AFC was formed in 1975 and was born out of a period of activity and advocacy that went on well before that time. The AFC is the institution that was charged with the responsibility for the development of the contemporary Australian film industry. It was a cultural brief that still remains today, about identity, about Australian voices and about Australian stories. I've been involved in the film and television industry since before the AFC was formed and have had fairly close connections with the AFC as the central institution within the film industry, and it's fair to say that throughout its various incarnations and management structures, the AFC has been driven by ideas and ideals, and advocates passionately for Australian culture.

The AFC is a public sector organisation, it is not a public service organisation, and that's quite an important distinction. As a statutory authority, it sits outside the public service, has its own independent charter, and reports directly to Parliament. It has its own independent relationship with the Minister. The Commission has a very strong sense of governance. The AFC is an organisation managed by people with very relevant industry experience and expertise, especially the Commissioners. During the debate there were quite erroneous remarks made about the lack of ability and expertise in the Commission to take on this task.

The AFC Chair is Maureen Barron who has been involved with the Australian film and television industry for 25 or 30 years and is now in a very senior position in Australia's largest television production and distribution company, Southern Star. Maureen was also in the nineties the head of business affairs at the Film Finance Corporation, and prior to that worked as an independent lawyer with some of the now very established and successful Australian feature filmmakers.

The Commission also has Rolf de Heer who almost embodies the contemporary history of the Australian film industry and has been making films regularly now for

over 20 years. He has a deep, abiding and passionate commitment to all aspects of the art of filmmaking.

Tony Zeccola is also one of our Commissioners and is responsible for building up and now managing Australia's most successful and far-reaching specialist cinema distribution and exhibition company. As well as that Tony operates internationally in the circle of specialist cinema and has been responsible for bringing contemporary Italian cinema to Australia and forming the annual Italian film festival.

Chris Noble has worked for Channel 9 most recently and before that the ABC and has had a long association with Australian television. Bruce Moir, documentary filmmaker of some note for a considerable length of time and was also chief executive of Film Australia for some time. Part of his responsibilities of course would have been the management of Film Australia's own archival collection. That's about half of our Commission and gives you an indication of the sort of level of expertise and experience that also exists among AFC senior management.

One of the things that it's important to say within this group is that we would expect, and it already exists in many areas of the Film and Sound Archives, that management and staffing of the Film and Sound Archives would be no different from the way that the AFC always has operated and will continue to operate.

In particular, we will appoint in time a new director of the archives who will have a credible and appropriate degree of professional experience in the area of audiovisual archiving.

We will welcome appropriate new appointments to the commission. We're aware that in the area of sound, apart from people who have an association with sound tracks and sound as far as film is concerned, we do have an absence of background experience. The Minister has indicated there will be new appointments to the Commission and we would expect that coming onto the Commission in the not-too-far-distant future will be people with broader areas of experience related to the area of audiovisual archiving, and specifically to the area of sound.

Finally, the AFC has always provided national industry leadership in the areas of the programs that we conduct, in the area of film development, in the area of industry and cultural development, and in the area of policy, research and information. We have been at the absolute centre of and led most of the major debates in the film and television industry over the years, whether it be issues about funding, about Australian content, or at the moment about Australia's negotiations with America about a free trade agreement, which has the potential to over time completely undermine areas of Australia's cultural industries.

The AFC has always been at the centre of such debates and we would expect that over time we will be not only contributing to and, most importantly, resourcing, but also providing leadership in the area of national audiovisual archiving, and contributing to the policy debates within that area, and discussions with government about them.

It's been on the public record ever since the decision was made, from the AFC's initial media release to some of the cross-questioning I underwent at a Senate

estimates hearing recently, to various other public forums at which I've made comments. We understand the core functions of the national Film and Sound Archives and we have a commitment to maintaining and delivering against these core functions. That's not to say that at the moment at the senior management or Commission level that we pretend to have a deep understanding of the detail of those functions or of how they are delivered. Nonetheless we understand the functions, and the importance of the functions, and we will very genuinely deliver against that commitment.

The area of consultation is important, and we have again undertaken to establish a formal process of consultation both within the organisation and outside of the organisation with established representative organizations, such as ASRA, and the AFC is an organisation which works closely with its constituency, is influenced by its constituency and is transparent in its operations and its decision-making processes in a way that a government department is not. We are at the centre of the area of operation in which we work, and while we don't always agree with our constituency, and sometimes have robust and vigorous arguments, there is virtually no area of policy or program delivery in which the AFC is involved which does not evolve through testing and review via a process of quite transparent consultation with those sectors of the industry that relate to it.

I see no difference in our mode of operation as far as the audiovisual archiving is concerned, and also specifically with sound. I invite ASRA to make sure that we do know who the representative organisations are, who the key players are and what the key debates and key issues are to ensure all the groups involved are taken into account.

The next steps over the next six months or so are to review the programs, operations and activities of the Film and Sound Archive. It's critical to understand the extent and effectiveness of the existing range of programs run by the archive. It's very important that we establish where the crossovers are with the existing work of the AFC. There may not be very many in the area of sound but beyond that in the area of film, particularly in public programs and access and some of the broader screen culture areas there are quite significant areas of crossover and it's very important to identify those.

It's responsible to establish where administrative efficiencies and savings can be made. There will be certain areas where there will be gains and those gains will go back into expanding the core content-based activities of the organisation.

One of the things that characterises the AFC is the way we work based around a culture of partnerships, certainly with individuals inasmuch as we fund individuals' creative work, but also partnerships with industry organisations and groups, and with other institutions and organisations within the country, and overseas to a certain extent.

Many of our programs are delivered by funding other organisations or by jointly funding and working with other organisations. Clearly, the core function of collection and preservation is one that should quite appropriately be contained and happen within an institutional base and it will continue to do so. There will be opportunities

to expand programs as a result of this integration and we would expect to do this in part by expanding the range of partnerships that we already have.

In the coming months a number of strategic policy decisions will be made about the future directions of the archive and its programs and, inevitably, the AFC itself as part of this new configuration.

It would be inappropriate to rush into anything, so it will be the end of 2003 before we're in a position to make any significant decisions and most importantly it will be early next year before we move towards recruiting a new director of the archive.

Question:

Is the AFC in its present form with its new responsibilities is going to give some thought to a name change?

Response:

I don't think we will. We're not ruling it off and saying we won't, but we will look at the whole area of communications. There's the issue of the name itself as we all know, and within this new configuration we have to ensure that the archive maintains an identity of its own as a collecting institution, whilst it will be a part of the Australian Film Commission.

Inevitably when we start looking at all that, one of the questions is going to be, "Are you going to keep calling yourselves the Australian Film Commission?" To make a decision to change it would be enormous in terms of the meaning, understanding and branding that the AFC has, not just within Australia but has internationally as well.

Comment:

It could become the Australian Film and Sound Commission.

Response:

It could become the Australian Film and Sound Commission, but if it became that it would have to start doing a lot more things than just archiving sound.

Question:

In your key objectives for the archives you mentioned obviously collecting and preservation. There's another activity missing, scholarship, and could you comment on that as having equal place, or does that belong elsewhere, in terms of people having that knowledge and understanding of the culture, of the technology, of the history, where I can go if I want to find information as well as materials.

Response:

In terms of the actual operations and delivery of that function of collection and preservation, scholarship is an absolute given. In the AFC's film development branch,

people would tend not to use the word “scholarship” but the key people who are involved in delivering the film development program across the country have a very high level of scholarship, otherwise they don’t get employed, and it’s a culture within the AFC that is terribly important. There is a respect for professional knowledge and for depth of professional knowledge to run right through the organisation.

Knowledge is specialised, and in all our program areas are people with a very high level of scholarship: in policy, in film development, in industry and cultural development. Within the archiving area it exists. Apart from of the people who are doing the work on a day-to-day basis, then that begins to cross over into an area that we call screen culture. This now also has something to do with sound as well, but nonetheless for the moment let’s call it screen culture. The AFC of course is very much involved in promoting scholarship, whether it be through conferences, festivals, seminars and publications. We have a high regard for the importance of that, we resource it and will continue to resource it.

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