

BROADCASTING SYMPOSIUM

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Broadcasting Seminar Conclusion

- We all, I'm sure, would like to congratulate NZOA and IPS for organising this seminar and, even more importantly, for its timing. Its not only in the immediate pre-election period - when departments are busily preparing their post-election policy briefs for the incoming administration - but on the eve of the formal establishment of a new Ministry of Heritage and Culture, which has a responsibility to advise ministers of policy options in the broad cultural sector, and also in the pre-Christmas run-up to the financial year 2000-2001 budget. This will be the first in nearly 75 years in which public service objectives in broadcasting are to be funded by way of grant rather than through a licence fee. This in itself means - or should mean - that current social and civic policy objectives, as set out in ss 36 and 37 of the 1989 Broadcasting Act, will have to be reviewed. That will be essential, in my view, so that ministers know more clearly what services they are contracting to buy, and how to establish their place within competing priorities from within the single 'pot' of the consolidated fund. This will no longer be supplemented by about \$100m a year of extra income from the household levy that's been available until now from the licence fee.
- So its a critical moment in the history of broadcasting in New Zealand and, especially I think, in the 40 year history of television in this country. And especially since we have not, in effect, had a public service television channel in this country since December 1988 when TVNZ became an SOE, and our economy entered the 'iron cage of Macdonalidisation.' We have lived at least part of Michael D. Higgins' future, for the past 11 years.
- Its also a matter for congratulations to everyone - the 25 or so panel members and about 100 people who've chosen to pay more than their annual licence fee for the opportunity to be here. In the main, we've chosen to look ahead to our *needs as citizens* in the first quarter, say, of the new century, and how the state can provide a better balance to our *wants as consumers* - which are now almost excessively well catered for (at least for urban dwellers) by the entertainment-driven commercial television services we have today. Rural dwellers have much more limited choice, and many are forced to buy Murdoch's Sky-TV services, at six times the cost of the licence fee, to get

a modicum of choice.

- By and large, we've recognised that the old battle - the public v the private sector debate - has been overtaken by a new agenda, one focussing on the role of a state having increasingly permeable borders in a globalised free market economy.
- Nor have we been distracted too much by the relatively tactical questions of whether or not all or part of TVNZ should be sold, or whether grants will prove a better or a worse system of funding. Of course those are still important issues - at least in a transitional period when, I'm sure we all hope, new strategic policies more relevant to our needs in the 21st century are going to be worked through.
- As we hope the incoming government will, we've taken a 'clean sheet of paper' approach to strategies and policy options, and that's clearly a good beginning. But it is only a beginning. There's a long way to go because, if we're to end up with coherent, comprehensive policies it will take time. Consider these points:
- Where, in the government's publication 'Strategic Result Areas for the public sector 1997-2000,' is to be found the development of policy frameworks and effective programmes which 'stimulate and affirms New Zealand's evolving identity and cultural heritage'? Curiously, its tucked away in sub-section (v) of SRA 5 'Economic and Social Participation,' which is mostly about moving people away from dependency on ACC benefits and broadening options for low-income families to meet their housing needs. Not a very obvious place, and seemingly not a very high priority, either.
- Although I think we all welcome the creation of the new Ministry of Heritage and Culture, why has it taken eight years, since the founding of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1991, to implement even the most embryonic 'machinery of government' changes needed to give it the power to discharge its mandate effectively and , for example, to produce the long-awaited 'over-arching policy' for the cultural sector - where public service broadcasting is now to be found?
- Why has the keynote document, 'The New Zealand government and national identity,' produced by the Department of Internal Affairs in June 1996, yet - as I understand it - to have a wide distribution and a structured programme for public information and debate and possible revision? This is an important paper because it recognises the links between government responsibilities, national cultural identity and social cohesion - and voters in my part of the world have recently put the latter, social cohesion, at the top of their list of concerns.

- All of these are critical questions, because those of us who've been involved in public sector budget rounds know that *spending* priorities depend on the *policy* priorities given by any government to the outcomes it wants to achieve.
- We also know that the process for a well-thought out, comprehensive review of strategic policy outcomes can be a lengthy business, although Marian Hobbs has signalled a three-month deadline for a task force on funding issues. For significant reforms to be achieved within our pattern of a three-year Parliamentary term, there has to be an extremely high degree of political willpower to make things happen, such as that put into play by a small ruling elite who led the 'Americanisation' of New Zealand 15 years ago.
- We're all reasonable people, I'm sure - otherwise we wouldn't be here! - and it's hard for a reasonable person not to conclude that issues of cultural heritage and national identity - now, as I've noted, formally including public service broadcasting - have so far been given a low priority by successive governments. This is even though many global analysts like the American political scientist Samuel Huntington - and I share his view - think that, in the 21st century world, cultural identity will be the touch-stone that establishes our place in this turbulent world: determines more clearly who our friends are, and where the most constructive trading and other alliances can be built.
- But if the debate is to focus on cultural identity alone - pivotal though it is, and one where it can readily be argued that public service broadcasting - especially elsewhere - has shown it has an equally central role in its mediation, promotion and maintenance - then, I fear, the argument might be lost yet again. That's why I was delighted to hear Michael D. Higgins put issues of democracy at the centre of today's debate, cautioning against a 'drift away from democracy,' and warning our politicians that an 'absence of mediation' by a public service broadcaster carries the risk of violent reactions to the political process.
- It's relatively easy for governments, concentrating on fighting battles for our continued political and economic independence within more traditional terms of reference, to marginalise cultural issues. In turn, it's then easy for their official advisers to define terms of reference for reports, and to find examples within those reports, to suggest that these are the concerns of a small elite: say, of only 10 - 15% of our people, and are therefore not affordable. Only 5% of the Ord Minnett report, 'The scoping of TVNZ,' was devoted to public service issues. An oblique critique of public service values rested on a footnote in someone else's book, while the report's least-preferred 'option three' turned out to be based on Britain's Channel Four - but only if you penetrated to Appendix Four on pages 186-7!

- Bringing in issues of democracy and of civil and political rights also brings in issues of direct importance to 100% of our people. Governments can't opt out of that debate: indeed, it can be argued that they are *themselves* democratic only to the extent to which they convey democratic values.
- And throwing the 'knowledge economy' or, and I agree with Ian Taylor - a better label would be a 'creative-based economy' - putting that into the pot will make it harder still for them to say 'no.' And I believe that, as Harvey McQueen suggested, convergence is more likely to focus on the TV screen than on the PC screen.
- That's why, on looking back over today, I started with the title of the seminar - 'Television - counting the cultural beat;' and the 'cultural identity' focus - the bi-cultural identity focus - of the first session, and wondered whether we'd already inadvertently put a ring around the agenda for future debate which might limit the field of discussion. I invite Jo and Arthur to consider a broader title for the write-up of today's proceedings, one, perhaps, like: 'Re-building a small state: the need for a public lane on the information highway.' Michael offered another approach, by calling his address 'creative citizens or passive customers: culture, democracy and public service broadcasters in a market era.'
- After all, Treasuries and Departments of Finance around the world have the duty to minimise public risk and to challenge any policy, especially any policy which they see as having outcomes that aren't easy to quantify; and policies which might close off future options for economic management. That's their job. Consider, for example, this brief quotation: 'Finance was still not convinced that television was something the country really needed and therefore pleaded patience, asking the cabinet to consider whether such a 'luxury service' was a true national priority...' Sound familiar? Well, that wasn't the New Zealand Treasury, 1999, but the Irish Department of Finance, 1959, fighting a (losing) rearguard action against the introduction of television there in 1961!
- I've chosen that particular example because Michael D Higgins's stimulating keynote speech immediately raised the parallels between two small Western democratic states such as ours and, superficially there are indeed many similarities between our two countries. Jo Tyndall mentioned some of them when she welcomed Michael. But, when you look a little closer, there are also some differences which may be even more fundamental, and need serious consideration, when considering our future broadcasting policy options.
- For a start, since Ireland regained its independence in 1922, Irish governments have consciously worked to re-build their state on the

foundations of their far more ancient nation. They've had a written constitution which has placed a strong emphasis on human rights, on the democratic process and - because the current version was written in 1937, after the radio era had begun - it specifically gave a role to broadcasting in that process of state re-building.

- Since the introduction of television there in 1961, that medium's also been seen as a key trigger in the foundations of 'modern Ireland,' the start of its current economic revival under the leadership of Sean Lemass 40 years ago. There is no 'quick fix!' And since 1976, there've been linkages in the legislation governing the operations of their public service broadcaster, RTE, to the 'democracy' strand in the constitution. So the state has some *power* over RTE, but it has accepted its *responsibilities*, too. At the millennium, RTE has survived within the West European *values-driven* ethic of public service broadcasting, and the current 1999 Broadcasting Bill ensures it will continue to do so, using new digital technologies as another tool. And, as a state, Ireland's future looks buoyant within the 350 million member economy of the European Union.
- By contrast, our future is far less certain and, I would argue, our broadcasting system means that we're less well equipped, as citizens, to understand the issues and so help our form of democracy to work as we struggle with these fundamental strategic choices. New Zealand doesn't have a written constitution - indeed, the last act in Parliament of former Prime Minister Mike Moore, the incoming Director-General of the World Trade Organisation - was an attempt to achieve consent to introduce his Private Members' Bill.
- That Bill doesn't even set out a draft constitution, but merely suggests a process for considering whether we need such a thing or not . It was rejected.
- So there's no formal constitutional framework for our communications system and, as we all know, TVNZ, our national broadcaster - as a state-owned enterprise - must comply with legislation that has only references to *financial* performance, and none to *programming* at all. TVNZ, in effect, like the rest of our broadcasting industry, slipped away from our hybrid form of West European values-driven broadcasting in 1988 and, ever since, has been a model of the US-style *business-driven* system.
- I make these points because I think that we have now to consider, as we've begun to do today, whether the role of the state in the emerging new system of information technology is a question of democratic rights, as I believe it is; and, if so, how that can be managed within the prevailing global ideology of the free market, even if - especially if - as many people now think, the pendulum's begun to swing back from its more extreme forms? Michael Volkerling said, for example, that the exclusive commercial environment in

which our television system operates treats people as 'escapists,' not as involved citizens; while Ian Fraser said - quite rightly, I believe - that we need television to empower people towards better decision-making.

- When I helped set up 'Morning Report' on RNZ's National programme nearly 25 years ago, we hadn't heard of a German philosopher called Habermass or his theories of the need for the deliberate provision of a 'public sphere' for debate in a democratic society - but that's exactly what we provided. We did so largely because the print medium in New Zealand has always been provincially-based, and we thought it a good idea that there should be a 'radio newspaper' first thing in the mornings, so that people in Invercargill could, firstly, know what was happening in Auckland, and vice versa; and then have those events - and regional and international news, too - analysed and placed in the context of a New Zealand perspective.
- Since then, of course, we've had a dramatic change in the ownership of our private sector media - not just newspapers, but radio and television, too - with the sector dominated by transnational multi-media 'absentee owners' like Dr Tony O'Reilly, from Dublin; Rupert Murdoch's US-based News Corp, and Canada's CanWest.
- Those developments - an outcome of the global free market - make it *all the more important* that there's intervention by the state to re-establish a 'public sphere' in the dominant medium of television: it's not the job of 'the market' to meet our civic, political and cultural needs. As one US analyst, the lawyer Monroe Price, puts it: 'There is no national identity of Murdoch, no flag or loyalty to Disney.' Of course not. Even Adam Smith, the 18th century 'father' of the free market ideology, acknowledged that there is a role for the state.
- In the 21st century, many analysts believe, the 'accidental synergy' of globalisation and the free market makes it *more*, not *less*, important for the state to protect or create a 'public sphere' so that there's a universal, common base of knowledge, and agreement - at least - on *what's on* the country's agenda, if not about the ultimate policy decisions themselves.
- What tools do we have to suggest to the incoming government that it should give early consideration, and a high priority, to our needs as citizens during yet another time of transition: one where Sir Douglas Graham, for instance, has forecast that we might become an Australian state within a decade; one where, to take another instance, the somewhat divisive process of resolution of Maori grievances is coming to an end - however slowly - and we will need, I suspect, a conscious programme of *national reconciliation* before we can all move forward together again?
- The Maori, of course, have had their Treaty with the Crown since 1840. This

was able to be used by the Maori Council in the Broadcasting Assets case, among others; and Bev Adlam has told us how the Treaty was an essential lever to achieve at least the possibility of a television channel with a mandate to revitalise te reo Maori.

- Even though the appeal against a decision to transfer state assets to the new state-owned enterprises of TVNZ and RNZ in the assets case was ultimately rejected by the Privy Council, at least the Maori Council and others had a constitutional basis for launching their argument.
- The nearest we have for *citizens as a whole*, I believe, is the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act of 1990 - a piece of legislation which is barely referred to, but which could be of importance in urging a high priority for the continuation of today's debate. I say that because its essentially designed to recognise, in New Zealand law, our country's commitment to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It's s.14 deals with freedom of expression as a dynamic, two-way process, like this: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and opinions of any kind in any form.'
- So, much of the day has been focussed on 'what' we think the country needs, and 'why.' Paul Norris outlined one possible scenario to answer the 'how' question, and I would like to support his call for levies on private sector operators. Why should they escape any statutory obligation to make local programmes, and have free access to a market of 3.8 million people? But it's only the politicians who can answer the 'when' question.
- Before turning to Arthur, to give us his insights into the way ahead, I'd like to end by saying that, while the idealist in me hopes that we could and should move forward with a multi-party political consensus on future public service broadcasting policy objectives, the realist in me believes that may not be possible.
- We're likely, I'm afraid, to have to work through another Parliament with MPs divided between differing models of society: those who believe the public interest needs some intervention to re-introduce a public service television channel, and to guarantee it the 'quality, diversity and independence' it needs, and those opposed to any state intervention at all.
- The crucial choice, as I see it, is between policies designed to reintroduce a vital artery of debate for people as citizens - one which is relatively independent of *both* the state *and* of the market - and policies which aim to marginalise them, which we've lived through for the last 15 years, or even to eradicate them.
- What those of us who care about public service values need now, is a strong

political 'champion' in Cabinet, to argue the case for us all as citizens, backed up by a public service 'champion' at the officials' level.

- Today's seminar will at least ensure that the debate is firmly on the political agenda and that, as happened sometimes in the past, it doesn't go by default. Thank you.

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