

Scrap Heap or Poster Child?

GORDON CAMPBELL considers the fate of local content.

Local content has always been the television industry's problem child. Everyone has an opinion about it, the expense entailed in looking after it is prohibitive, and at the end of the day, no one ever seems grateful about the trouble being taken on its behalf.

With the axing of TVNZ's social charter, New Zealand On Air is raising local content as a solo parent these days – no one else has the money – and the future of that relationship looks uncertain. As you may recall, the money that had originally been earmarked by Government for charter programmes got parked over at NZOA and was renamed the Platinum Fund. Two-thirds of the \$15.1 million set aside for the initial Fund have now been allocated, and any ongoing role in supporting local content will depend on the Government setting aside more money for the Fund in this year's Budget.

On the face of it, that might seem unlikely. After all, the Platinum Fund was originally comprised of money set aside for a role – fulfilling TVNZ's social charter – that no longer exists. Moreover, every State agency has been put on notice that they face a period of belt-tightening for the foreseeable future, with no extra money available. Given the current climate, the Platinum Fund could easily look like a relic of a bygone era, and ripe for culling.

In addition, pessimists about the future of local television content will also be looking at TVNZ these days with the sort

of prurient interest one takes in driving past a car wreck. The State broadcaster has now been stripped of any obligations to function as anything other than a commercial cash cow. Even so, it has also been saddled with returning a 9% annual dividend to Government, which seems a totally ridiculous demand. There would hardly be a media company now anywhere in the world returning that level of dividend to its shareholders. In effect, TVNZ is being asked by Government to perform harakiri, with the remnants to be sold later for scrap.

While TVNZ seems to be doomed, the Government gods could end up smiling a lot more kindly on the Platinum Fund. Yesterday's outcast could wind up being adopted by Arts Minister Chris Finlayson and Broadcasting Minister Jonathan Coleman as the poster child for the Government's token commitment to quality in broadcasting. Certainly, when NZOA announced its December round of successful Fund applicants, Broadcasting Minister Jonathan Coleman was more than willing to sing its praises: "The Platinum Fund was designed to open up public broadcasting funding to a range of producers and broadcasters. No one entity has a monopoly on the best ideas, and yesterday's funding decisions prove that... The Platinum Fund guarantees high quality public broadcasting..." etc, etc.

Having showered NZOA and its prize fund with such praise, the Government can hardly kill

off the initiative a few months later. The more likely outcome at Budget time is that the Fund itself will be replenished – and the rest of NZOA's normal funding levels will be cut in order to accommodate it. This will put any local production houses reliant on NZOA funding for their projects onto subsistence rations. Even at the heady height of the Platinum Fund's largesse last December there were only four – count 'em, four – projects selected for funding. Namely, two long-form dramas, a documentary series and a TV special, all of which will be required to be finished and ready for primetime screening later this year.

In other words, the prospects for local content funding are dire – cold turkey at worst, slim pickings at best. Are there any advantages about the system for local content funding now taking shape? Not many. Any optimists out there will be grateful about the commitment to screen Platinum Fund winners in primetime – and not, as with the social charter, at some graveyard hour on TVNZ's programme schedule. Moreover, given NZOA's

culture of transparency at least everyone will know what is being funded, under which criteria, and why.

That will mark a welcome change from the corporate wheeling, dealing and backstabbing rife beforehand at TVNZ. Looking ahead though, one can only hope the pressing political need for NZOA to spread its paltry available funds between multiple broadcasters will not introduce a fresh set of distortions into the selection process.

In a sense, the Key Government is turning back the clock. When broadcasting was first de-regulated in the late 1980s, NZOA came into being as the guardian of public broadcasting goals in this new, commercialised universe. Now, with the charter gone, NZOA is once again the last lonely outpost of quality broadcasting with a local flavour. Come Budget time, robbing NZOA's normal funding to enable the Platinum Fund to survive would be indefensible – so, is the Government willing to commit right now to keeping both the Platinum Fund and NZOA's current levels of funding intact? ●

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