

PRESENTATION OF AUSTRALIAN FILM INSTITUTE

AWARDS FOR 1969

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2 DECEMBER 1969

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr John Gorton

Professor, Distinguished Guests and Ladies and Gentlemen :

It is usual, of course, to say that it is a pleasure to talk to an audience gathered together for whatever purpose it may be. On this occasion it is more than true because I think that what you have done in the past, and what we can, if I may say so, do together in the present and the future, will bring a new dimension to Australian life. We can show the rest of the world what Australia is, how its people live, and impress on them the fact that there are other things than avant-garde kangaroos or Ned Kellys in this great country of ours.

You may be a little surprised to hear me say that because I am sure that a number of you would remember some years ago, as a Senator - when I didn't have to watch my words so closely because they were taken to mean what in fact they meant and weren't interpreted by others and then criticised as a result of the interpretation - I pointed out in the course of a debate that I was attracted to the kind of television film and other films in which booted men advanced towards each other at the crossroads of a small town in the Western, used the immortal line from the "Secret Life of Walter Mitty" -- "I wouldn't do that if I wez yew, Toledo". I also found some attraction to the kind of private eye film where somebody went out into the night with a couple of revolvers, was attacked, hit on the head by beer bottles, knocked into the gutter, and five minutes later was able to get up and lick his weight in wildcats. This attracts me because it is the sort of milieu to which I am accustomed - if you understand what I mean.

Well, at the time that caused a little comment and I think for most of the population it caused a certain amusement because they agreed by and large with it. To a section of the population engaged in writing, particularly political correspondents from Canberra, it gave an opportunity to hold up their hands in horror that such a Philistine had come amongst us. But you must remember that at this stage and in that context, those remarks were made against a background of speech after speech after speech dealing solely and exclusively with culture in the films.

Now I'm no Goering. Every time I hear the word "culture", I don't want to reach for my revolver, but I do want and did want to have some opportunity to feel other than like a cultured pearl, if I may say so, and occasionally to swim into the sea and have these folk things before us.

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But I think on the whole I might in the intervening years have been justified because you will agree with me, won't you, that critical taste on the whole has tended to catch up with me.

I understand that Westerns are now high fashion and Western fans include the critics of "Les Cahiers du Cinema" and "Sight and Sound", so perhaps one was a little avant-garde oneself at that particular time. But on becoming Prime Minister, it did seem to me that the film industry here in Australia had reached that climax, that point where a decision had to be made, which occurs in all the best Westerns. And so one of my earliest acts was to push forward plans for the Australian Council of the Arts as a whole - and I pay tribute to my predecessor for having announced its inauguration - and we nominated the Council Members in June, 1968. They met a month later and their Film and Television Committee had its first meeting in November of 1968.

The Interim Report of that Committee was in my hands by May 1969. It was adopted without any alteration, the moneys asked for were provided without any reduction - which is even more unusual - and in this year's Budget, provision was made for £300,000 - \$100,000 for setting up an Interim Council to plan for a National Film and Television School. The personnel for that Interim Council have been announced and the first action they are going to undertake is to all go overseas to study things, and then come back again and tell us what we ought to do. But at least that has been launched, and I think the travellers will be launched in about another three weeks.

Then there was \$100,000 for the setting up of an experimental film fund to which you referred - mainly for short subjects, short subjects which could be exhibited either on the television screen or as film in theatres. And then there was an exhibition fund - another \$100,000 - for the promotion and distribution of such experimental films.

After the election, as I told you, the Council was named. But there are going to be interesting decisions to be made. Should the school be part of a university - the National Film and Television School - should it be part of a university so the film is seen essentially as an art form? I don't believe it should, but that will be a matter of recommendation and discussion and decision. I would prefer to see it in rather more practical terms. Perhaps it could be seen, and this is coming closer to it; I think, as a film school linked with one of the colleges of advanced education where technologists of all kinds - and we must include in this, I think, if it doesn't upset people - directors, producers, designers of scenery, script writers, all of whom have more than a merely theoretical part to play - a practical part to play - in the

development of film and television in Australia.

Or should it as another alternative, and perhaps the best of the lot, should it be a part of some entirely new - not college of advanced education, not university - some entirely new centre where not only the National Film and Television School sets up for its purposes, but where the National Institute of Dramatic Art might perhaps set up for its purposes instead of in the University of New South Wales, where possibly the School of Opera or Ballet might also set up for its purposes, and where all these art forms which have so much in common could perhaps cross-fertilise each other. Well these, and perhaps other things of which I haven't spoken, are the recommendations for which we are waiting and which, as soon as they are received, will be considered and on which a decision will be made.

I am told by people closely associated with the industry that the films of the 1970's may have very little in common with the films of the 1950's or 1960's in terms of form or content. As to the truth or otherwise of that, I don't know, but the experimental film fund, I suggest, is particularly important because through its tactics, through its trials, perhaps through its errors, the new writers, directors and editors of the Australia of the 1970's will be discovered. And we hope soon to advertise for applications for assistance to the Australian Council of the Arts and the Australian Film Institute.

I said in a policy speech in 1969 that if we were returned as the Government, we would legislate for a film and television development corporation (recommended to us again by our advisers), and that this legislation would be brought down in the first Session of 1970. An initial capital grant of one million dollars will be provided, and as that is spent, or as part of it is spent, it will be topped up each year to bring it back to one million dollars, and the fund will be administered by an independent board, whose members will be announced after the bill becomes law.

I want to emphasise to you that this fund is intended for investment in films. It is not intended as a give-away programme. It is intended for investment. We will be indicating our optimism by such an investment, but we mustn't be expected, and I am sure it would be wrong if we did underwrite all the cost of a film or films in this programme. Producers will still be expected to have a substantial equity in a film and to show faith in their artistic judgment, and I would hope and expect that distributors - those people whom I am sure many of us think of as the bad man in the Western films, stalking along in a black hat and black gauntlets - the distributors should also be prepared to invest in such an enterprise and share the losses, if there are losses, and profits if there are profits.

We believe, for we have optimism, that after a period of time, properly-made investments in film industries will be bringing in profits and that then there will be no need any longer for the public, through the Government, to top up the fund each year. That is our objective, and the measure of our success will be gauged by that.

I hope that the Government, having shown the red badge of courage - or in the case of a Liberal Government, the blue badge of courage - should in turn encourage all investors to back this industry.

We do expect profits in money terms. Above all, we expect profits in human terms. Our industry, I think in Australia, is one of the oldest in the world. I am told that "Soldiers of the Cross" was made in 1899 in Australia in Murrumbidgee - and frankly that is all I know about it and probably that is all most people in this room know about it, but at least there was a film made at that time in Australia. I would like to see it now. I am sure it has got all those jerky little motions they had in the films we used to see in the past. But that initial silent movie era was stopped in Australia by the introduction of the talking film, as so many of the film stars of the time had their careers ruined by the introduction of the talking film because it didn't seem quite in place for somebody playing the part of the Queen of Rumania to have a Brooklyn accent. So in Australia's case there was no great desire apparently in the rest of the world to hear an Australian accent. And the film industry was hurt further by the depression and suffered years of official neglect.

Well, the Government has given support to other arts since the 1930's - ballet, drama, opera. Films in the 1960's seem to us, and to me, to be a logical extension of what we have been doing with increased momentum in the last couple of years.

The demand for film is very much greater on television than it ever was when the picture theatres were at their peak. I am told that 18-year-olds today have seen over 500 feature films by watching television which is more than we ever used to see as children or as 18-year-olds, travelling each Saturday to see the "Perils of Pauline" in the silent movies.

So even to keep up a respectable proportion of Australian interest, to be able to show, to lift up to the world a mirror to this country of ours, we must produce more films and we must produce more videotape material.

I assure you, Sir, and this audience, of my own personal determination, of my own personal commitment to this, and of my own personal burning desire that it should be successful for the sake of Australia and for the sake of the people living in it - or some of the people living in it. Because this gives another opportunity for individuals with particular talents in this field to be able to express those talents, express their personalities, have a real reason, an interest in living, and this is part of what a modern society must provide to all those who are components of it.

We have done well in the field of painting, of course; that is perhaps better known than any of our other arts overseas. If in the next ten years, in the exciting seventies, we can in the film world produce the equivalent of a Drysdale or a Dobell, then we shall have amply justified the work that all you gentlemen have done and the support that you in the audience have given.

We need to be able to see ourselves through the world of film - ourselves through other eyes if you like - but the eyes behind the camera. This we need to see in our own country, but even more, I think, we need other countries to see just how we live and how we think and how we dispute and what we do.

I doubt if many people living in Asia or in Europe would have any real idea of what life in the United States is like, if it were not for films - and of course they haven't got any real idea of what life in the United States is like because they see films, but at least they have an impression which they get through films! I would hope that it would be our chance to give an impression, and a true impression, to people of the world of what our country and our people are like in the city, in the country, and in the problems which beset each one of them and in the way in which they seek to overcome them.

I think that in this way we can make a contribution to the lives of many people in this nation. Through the exciting seventies and at the end of them, I hope there will be established here a film industry, not yet as great as those in other countries, but so great that its ultimate greatness cannot be denied and cannot be prevented. And if this does come about, then this will be one of the most delightful things for me personally because I will feel I have had some part in it and I will feel it is a thing worth having done. I will be able to hold that to myself even though I haven't done the work that all you others have.

And therefore, Sir, I thank you for having asked me along tonight, and it was a real pleasure to be able to come.

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