

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
AT THE OPENING OF THE 21ST SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL -
STATE THEATRE, SYDNEY, SUNDAY 2 JUNE 1974

One of the most impressive aspects of the recent election campaign was the public involvement and commitment of men and women whose voices are not often heard in political affairs. For me, there was no better, no more moving an example of this than a meeting here in the Sydney Opera House only 5 days before the people went to the polls.

On that day, about 20 men and women stood with me before a capacity crowd in the Concert Hall and declared their allegiance. My appreciation of their action was in no way diminished, of course, by the fact that they declared their support for the Government which I lead. Those men and women represented various groups and occupations in our community. But, appropriately, in Sydney's most striking symbol of cultural endeavour, the biggest single group consisted of artists: novelists, poets, painters, actors, producers and the like. I don't believe any of them will feel belittled if I say they were led by our only Nobel Prize winner for literature, Patrick White.

These men and women did not talk simply about the arts. Some stressed their belief in the need for Australia to maintain a modern and independent stance in foreign policy. Some stressed their concern about the environment and conservation - a concern which would have been particularly pertinent if stated in this remarkably ornamented theatre. Some stressed a more general concern about the type of society they wanted Australia to be: Patrick White, for example, wanted to ensure the end of what he described in a somewhat startling phrase as "the mental constipation" of the past.

Nevertheless, a dominant concern for all of these people was for the future of their own fields, for the future of the arts in Australia.

I don't think it is vain of me to say that they believed that the present Australian government has done more for the arts than any previous Australian government. I appreciated greatly the willingness of those and other Australian artists to acknowledge just what we have done. In politics, one doesn't always expect such acknowledgements to be given. In this case, it was; and, if I can be so bold, I believe that that recognition was justified. Indeed through the Australian Council for the Arts alone, the Australian government is providing \$14 million for support to the arts in Australia this financial year. In other words, our assistance is twice that of 1972/73. Response to our new program has been overwhelming. The Council for the Arts has received about 4,000 applications in the last year for assistance for various art forms and has provided about 1,600 grants.

One of the major objectives of our program has been to help our artists in the pursuit of excellence. This pursuit would not be possible if they did not have financial security. It is fair to assume that already hundreds of Australians who would otherwise be working in other fields or in other countries are now pursuing professional careers in the arts in Australia for the first time.

The continued security of our artists, however, must always depend on community support. That is why our program has emphasised the need to encourage the spread of interest and participation in the arts throughout our society. In turn, this can only be aided by the achievement of another major objective; for the arts to help provide an expression of a national identity. I believe the aim of community support is already starting to be achieved. In a small way, the meeting at the Opera House 3 weeks ago demonstrated this. Not many years ago, one might have expected a lot of Australians to be unimpressed by a statement of endorsement by a group of artists. Now, I think, Australians generally have become sufficiently proud of their achievements to pay attention to them.

In no area has the need for Australians to have the opportunity to pursue excellence, to encourage community support and to express a national identity been greater than in the film industry. Although it had a vigorous and promising beginning, it has languished for years. Yet there is no question that we have had people of talent who have craved the chance to restore the industry, to create worthwhile Australian films and to reach an Australian audience. We are determined to give them that chance.

The prospects for the film industry look very bright at present. Last year, seven Australian feature films were produced. Already in 1974 nine Australian feature films are in production in addition to one financed by American interests. A further 16 feature film projects are being planned and six of them are expected to go into production during the next 12 months. Not only has there been a great improvement in the number of films being produced in the last two years; there has also been a great improvement in the public response to those films. There have been several notable examples of films which have attracted large crowds to our main city cinemas.

The Australian Government is seeking to ensure this recent trend will develop further. It is making financial assistance for film making available through two government bodies - the Film and Television Board of the Australian Council for the Arts and the Australian Film Development Corporation. Since its formation in February last year, the Film and Television Board has made 407 grants worth nearly \$2 million. These grants were given to individual film makers and to organisations, such as film co-operatives to help establish cinemas and distribute independently produced Australian films; to the National Film Theatre for nationwide screenings of films of specialised interests; and to film festivals in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. The Board has established a number of community access video centres in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and has similar plans for Brisbane, Adelaide, Whyalla and Fremantle. The Board also plans to provide a cinema in each capital city to show Australian films and for use by non-commercial film makers and organisations for screenings, workshops and seminars.

The other main arm of Government assistance, the Film Development Corporation, has helped with the financing and promotion of feature films. It has recently been involved, for example, in the promotion and exhibition of "The Cars that Ate Paris" at the Cannes Film Festival. The Film Development Corporation will soon be replaced by the Australian Film Commission. This follows the Government's acceptance of a number of major recommendations by the Tariff Board which enquired last year into motion picture films and television programs. Cabinet has agreed that the new Film Commission should be able to provide up to half the budget for an Australian film. And in addition, to provide a promotion subsidy for such a film. The precise amount of money to be made available to the Commission is still being considered but it can expect more funds than have been available to the Film Development Corporation.

I realise that there is still pressure within the film industry for a major change in the distribution and exhibition system for films within Australia. The Tariff Board did make some recommendations in this area. But Cabinet considered that the Constitutional barriers to the implementation of these recommendations were too great. Nevertheless we will continue to watch this area of the industry carefully to ensure as much as we can that the films released from Australia's New Wave receive adequate distribution and exhibition.

The Government of course doesn't seek to stifle the showing of overseas films in Australia. On the contrary, it is part of our stated policy for all the arts that Australians can see important works from overseas. A large canvas which hangs in another public building in this city is controversial testimony to that desire. Similarly, we regard it as important that film makers and filmgoers are able to see the range of films that is offered at a festival such as this. As the Sydney Film Festival comes of age, I am glad, as the Head of a Government which has provided support for its activities, to declare it open.
