



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 1981

SPEECH AT THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF
AUSTRALIA'S FIRST FEATURE FILM

Film is perhaps the only new art form for which the twentieth century can take most of the credit, and the fact that Australians were involved in cinema in such a significant way so early is something which we can indeed be proud of. The clips which we have just seen of the 1906 version of Ned Kelly, and of three more recent films as well, tell a fascinating story of the initiative and creativity of Australians, and there is no doubt that Australian film makers deserve the recognition and respect which are now being paid to their work worldwide.

In the early days of cinema, one critic said that this new art had within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have previously failed to find expression, and went on to say that the film-maker would have enormous riches at his command when he found some new symbol for expressing thought. There is little doubt that new symbols for expressing both thought and emotion have been found through cinema, little doubt either that new symbols are still being developed, indeed it is perfectly plain that the potential of cinema as a medium for communication and artistic expression are being very impressively explored.

The Australian community has responded with real enthusiasm to the success of Australian films in recent years, and while many people will take some time to grasp the reality that Australian films are as good as any in technical and artistic terms, everybody welcomes the increased portrayal of various aspects of the Australian way of life through Australian films. Australia has one of the oldest film industries in the world, for the first Australian newsreel, showing scenes of the 1896 Melbourne Cup, was made and shown only a year after the Lumiere brothers gave the first public screening of films in Paris.

The Story of the Kelly Gang is credited as the first feature film made in Australia, although it was not until later that the film was recognised as a pioneering feat. The "feature

film" must rate as one of the half-dozen key inventions in the entire history of cinema, and this invention, which the Tait brothers made in this country seventy five years ago, has become the foundation of the film industry worldwide. The

Tait brothers showed a great deal of astuteness and commercial insight in producing that film, and many of you here would no doubt like to match the return on capital which they achieved, for I understand that the film returned 25,000 pounds for an outlay of about 1,000 pounds. It is tragic that we only have three and a half minutes of this historic film which would originally have taken about one and half hours to screen.

And I would like to take the opportunity to give the strongest encouragement to the last "Last Film Search" which represents a concerted effort to discover and conserve what remains of Australia's early film history. This search, which is being undertaken by the National Library of Australia aims to gather early Australian films into the National Film Archive.

The stock on which films were made up until 1957 is unstable, and much of it is now nearing the end of its life, so the search project, which was launched in October with the sponsorship of a number of organisations, is an urgent one, and I understand that hundreds of reels have already been found. At present, however, only 5% of Australia's silent films have been found and preserved. Every effort needs to be made to increase that percentage in the few years still available before the old film stock disintegrates, and a complete print of the Kelly story would be a find of immense significance.

The Kelly film in 1906 was a pacesetter. It was followed by Robbery Under Arms in 1907, and in the period between 1906 and 1913 some 90 films were made, many of them bushranging dramas and theatrical melodramas. 153 films were made during the years of the First World War, and the decade following 1918 saw the production of 96 films including such classics as The Sentimental Bloke, On Our Selection and A Girl of the Bush. I understand that these particular films will feature in a nationwide film festival, legends on the screen, which will be exhibited throughout Australia in January, and that will no doubt be a fascinating festival.

In the late 1920's, a number of factors, especially the advent of "talkies", with their higher costs, and the strength of Hollywood eroded the Australian feature film industry. But Australians never relinquished their claims on the feature film, and there remained a substantial reservoir of film making expertise in other areas. To a considerable extent this was a product of the requirement that commercials on Australian television should be essentially Australian in production.

The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal still maintains this requirement, and as a result, between two and three thousand commercials are now being produced annually in Australia, and this provides valuable work and experience in film making. The local content provisions for television introduced in 1960 have worked in the same direction.

The success of these policies is evident from the fact that today's Australian content is running at some 55% in peak time, compared with about 40% in 1976/77, and about 70% of expenditure on programmes by T.V. stations is on Australian material.

The 1970s were obviously a period of tremendous development and advance for Australian films, and the extent to which film lovers in other countries are wanting to see Australian films is a tribute to the people in the local industry who have worked so hard and with such imagination and dedication.

While it is the creativity of film makers which has achieved the revival of the Australian film industry, nobody would deny that government support has been critical to the development which has occurred, and as I said some years ago, the Government will continue to encourage film and television, in partnership with the industry, the ultimate aim being self-sufficiency.

In 1970, the Commonwealth Government established the Australian Film Development Corporation to foster development of feature films. This corporation was subsequently absorbed by the Australian Film Commission, which has developed or invested in a large number of major feature films including, "Picnic at Hanging Rock", "Caddie", "Newsfront", "Storm Boy", "Breaker Morant", and "Gallipoli", and indeed up to 60% of investment funds in feature film production over the last 12 years were provided by government film bodies, with more than \$10 million being provided by the Commonwealth.

An experimental film fund was also set up in 1970 under the Australia Council to develop new talent. Plans were underway in the same year for the establishment of a national film and television school, and its first graduates included Phillip Noyce and Gillian Armstrong, who were later to direct "Newsfront", and "My Brilliant Career", respectively.

From the point of view of government assistance, and investment in the industry, the most significant development in the past year has been the amendment of the Income Tax Assessment Act to assist film production. In broad terms, the Act now provides for 150% of expenditure on eligible films to be allowed as deduction against income in the year in which the film is first used to produce assessable income, and an exemption from taxation of all receipts from the film up to an amount equal to 50% of an investor's original capital expenditure.

The concession is, as John Howard has said, not only extremely generous, but is unparalleled in taxation laws, and as you know, he will be reviewing its workings with the executive of the Film and Television Production Association in due course.

I understand that the industry has settled down now the new arrangements are in place, and we all look forward to more and more good films to prove both the wisdom of the Government's decision and the talent of your industry.

The present thriving condition of the film industry with 16 feature films currently being made in Australia and a further 11 films projected to commence production early next year, is not something we can take for granted. But the combination

of enthusiasm, talent and experience which the Australian Film Industry now possesses provides grounds for optimism about the future, and I am confident that the industry will make good use of the opportunities which exist to build a great and strong film industry in Australia in the next 75 years.

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