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**PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION
BROADCASTING INQUIRY**

**Supplementary Submission from Mr Harvey May
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Introduction

This submission is concerned with Chapter 9 of the draft report, and specifically with cultural diversity and local drama content. I welcome the Commission's statement that it considers the objectives of local content regulation to be 'largely cultural and social'. This statement would seem to relate to Object 3 (e) of the *Broadcast Services Act* and the Object of the Australian Content Standard (1999). Both Objects make reference to broadcasting services having a role in 'developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and *cultural diversity*'.

The Australian Content Standard attempts to achieve its Object by ensuring that the content of a programme be the result of the work of Australian creative personnel. One assumes the logic of this, is that these personnel will contribute to making programme content that satisfies the Object of the Standard. This includes developing and reflecting cultural diversity. The Standard does not attempt to measure or set criteria in the programme content itself for determining the presence of Australian identity, character or cultural diversity. This approach to content regulation has been deemed problematic, as was evidenced in the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's unsuccessful attempt to establish an "Australian Look Test".

The Commission has rightly identified that the creative elements test does not however provide a clear method for ensuring that the Standard is meeting its social and cultural objectives. The need for some evaluative instrument is a welcome recommendation. Before turning to this point however there are arguments for retaining the creative elements test for key creative personnel – and this is particularly so with regard to the development and reflection of *Australia's* cultural diversity.

The Creative Elements Test

The experiences of Australia's immigrant populations and indigenous peoples are exceptional to their relationship with Australia. An argument that non-Australian overseas writers, directors or actors from culturally diverse backgrounds, would represent the knowledge and experience of Australian culturally diverse groups in reflecting and developing a sense of Australian cultural diversity, is culturally inappropriate and possibly offensive to these groups in Australia (an example would be an African American playing the role of an indigenous Australian). In order for our culturally diverse creative personnel to have the opportunity to help in developing and reflecting a sense of cultural diversity, the creative elements test should remain. This is also a sound requirement with regard to supporting cast.

In researching casting and cultural diversity for a project undertaken at QUT, I spoke with all major casting directors involved with Australian commercial television drama programmes, regarding the employment of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. It was made very clear in these interviews that appearing in the role of supporting actor is an essential step in an actor's progression towards obtaining lead roles. This is particularly so with regard to actors from culturally diverse backgrounds who may not have had the experience required to attain lead roles. If opportunities for supporting cast are reduced, due to removal of the supporting cast requirement in the creative elements test, an essential opportunity may be denied actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. This would result in fewer actors from culturally diverse backgrounds gaining work on Australian drama programmes.

* The title of this project will be *Report on Casting in Commercial Television Drama*, by Harvey May, Terry Flew and Christina Spurgeon.

Casting and Cultural Diversity

A Queensland University of Technology research team has recently completed the first comprehensive survey of casting practices in commercial television drama. Previous research (Jakubowicz, 1994; Nugent *et al*, 1993; CLC, 1992) has noted the lack of cultural diversity on commercial drama with regard to the portrayal of cultural diversity, mainly due to the poor participation of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. The QUT research team surveyed actors in on-going roles in the seven drama series and serials screened in 1999. The findings of the QUT research show that roles for actors from non-English speaking backgrounds have increased considerably compared to earlier research (see Appendix One: Chart A and Table A). However, the great majority of these actors are so called "second generation immigrants". That is, they were born in Australia and have one or both parents born in a non-English speaking country. The situation for actors of Aboriginal background has also improved.

However, there are very few opportunities for actors of non-English speaking background who were born overseas. In addition, no actor appeared in an on-going role from an Asian background. And finally, no actor in an on-going role in any programme spoke with an accent. These results demonstrate that there are areas of concern for the employment of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds.

If one accepts that Australian content should reflect cultural diversity in that programme matter deals with stories about our recent arrivals, about our Asian communities and reflects the "sounds" of those Australians with accents, then recent programming does not reflect this cultural diversity.

Draft Recommendation 9.4: For the Australian's and children's content quotas, which remain in place, the ABA should conduct regular and public evaluations against the social and cultural objectives of the content requirements.

In order to determine whether the Australian Content Standard quota for drama is meeting its cultural and social objectives, the ABA could be instructed to carry out the following research:

- Triennial monitoring of the roles obtained by actors in drama programmes to ascertain the level and type of portrayal of cultural diversity. Such a monitoring system has existed in the United States for many years and been shown to be effective in increasing the participation of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. The recent research carried out by the CUIF team would provide an already established protocol and benchmark for future research.
- Community attitude research carried out with audiences from mainstream and culturally diverse backgrounds, in order to assess from an audience perspective whether local programming is developing and reflecting cultural diversity.
- The ABA develop with industry, measures to address any problems or deficiencies found in the above research related to improving the portrayal of cultural diversity. Such measures may be the implementation of a television code of practice related to monitoring the portrayal of cultural diversity.

References Cited

Communications Law Centre. (1992). *The Representation of non-English Speaking Background People in Australian Television Drama*. Sydney: Communications Law Centre.

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Nugent, S., Loncar, M., and Aisbett, K. (1993). *The People We See on TV: Cultural Diversity on Television*. Sydney: ABA.