

Xenophobia: The Great Local Content Myths

R.J. STOVE

Recent agitation by Australian media pressure groups over New Zealand content on our TV screens represents a mish-mash of rancorous chauvinism, historical ignorance and double standards.

THE scene: Jacobean England, circa 1610. The place: Ye Olde Worlde Star Chamber, where Ye Olde Worlde Luvvie Lobby Groups are once again in session. The defendant: one William Shakespeare, actor, former poacher, and dramatist, who has been summoned to answer the charges of infringing local content regulations in play after play. Instead of doing the decent thing and sticking to portrayals of the authentic English National Identity, he ransacks writings from Saxo Grammaticus (the 12th-century Danish author who dreamed up *Hamlet's* storyline), Matteo Bandello (the 16th-century Italian responsible for *Romeo and Juliet*), Scottish chroniclers (who gave him the idea for *Macbeth*), Greek chroniclers (*Pericles*, *Timon of Athens*), and even, horror of horrors, France (Joan of Arc swash-buckles onstage in *Henry VI Part I*, where—to add to Shakespeare's 'elitist' sins—she's referred to by her French name of La Pucelle). Incapable of denying these indictments, the Swan of Avon pleads guilty and is sentenced to condign punishment: having to write the next 592 episodes of that classic Jacobean soap, *Ye Olde Worlde EastEnders*.

Does this scenario strike you as far-fetched? It shouldn't. It's no different in principle from, and all too similar in fine detail to, the antics of Australia's True Blue media lobby group. True Blue has been incensed by the High Court's judgement on 28 April, which found that Australia's obligations under the 1988 Closer Economic Relations agreement with New Zealand must take precedence over the Australian *Broadcasting Services Act's* local content requirements.

Certainly True Blue is running scared, as only a special interest group

can—True Blue being an amalgam of the Australian Writers' Guild (which covers authors for TV and the movies), the Screen Producers' Association of Australia (SPAA), the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the Australian Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission. From its plenipotentiaries' rage at the High Court's pronouncement, you'd think that the judges involved had advocated paedophilia or something. (On reflection, you wouldn't: paedophilia advocacy would have been much better received in luvvie milieux.)

The MEAA's representative, actor [sic] Sonia Todd, proclaimed the arrival of 'a black day for the Australian television industry.'¹ True Blue as a whole described the judges' decision as 'a dis-

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aster that would cost the local industry between \$100 and \$150 million,² which lament inspires puzzlement as to when anybody in the Yartz last cared about fiscal prudence. Tom Jeffrey, the SPAA's President, emitted a veritable yelp of Les-Pattersonish existential despair: 'This issue [the judges' finding] goes to

the heart of what we are as a society. It puts under threat our role as Australians, our culture, our history, our traditions.'³ As with so much in modern Australian life (the waterfront above all), so with the True Blue affair: shop-steward sentiments which one hoped had been silenced by simple global economic reality have emerged from the swamplands with redoubled punitive strength, the spectacle suggesting a new *Night of the Living Dead*.

By the bye, if you're wondering when you last heard of Miss Todd and Mr Jeffrey, you're not alone. Save for *Mother and Son's* celebrated jokesmith Geoffrey Atherden—and even he seemed, in *The Age*, to be going through the motions rather than doubled up with righteous anguish⁴—none of the lobbyists quoted were exactly household names, except, perhaps, in their own households. Were Ruth Cracknell or Ron Haddrick to join the barricades, they would deserve a respectful hearing, if no more. But then the leaders in any profession usually have better things to do with themselves than dominate vested-interest quangos. The leaders in any profession can usually get a life.

What exactly is this 'local content requirement' that True Blue is so keen to defend? Clearly a sensitive plant, that will shrivel at even the slightest breath of foreign competition. Well, up to a point, Lord (or Comrade) Copper. As *The Age* pointed out, no less than 55 per cent of televised material between 6 am and midnight on every station is Australian-made already.⁴ (Antipodean newspaper scribes never being reticent about stating the bleeding obvious, *The Age* included such definitions of 'Australian-made' as 'made by Australians'. These Australians can, need one say, be ex-Kiwis: Jane Campion, Sam Neill ...) Stop and think about that statistic:

55 per cent. A 55 per cent market share doesn't strike most people as justification for publicly funded cocooning. If the rest of us could by our own vocational endeavour acquire 55 per cent of any market, ordinary politeness would surely prevent us from shrieking (true) blue murder about any threats—real or fictive—from competitors. But clearly the Yartz apparat has, once again, different notions of politeness from the norm: to say nothing about different notions of economic sanity, the apparat's own economic outlook not having discernibly progressed (or even altered) from what was considered hot stuff on East German factory floors in around 1952.

Every apparat needs a scapegoat; and True Blue's scapegoat is New Zealand, whose success at producing ratings-winners of mythological bent—*Xena*, *Hercules*—is seemingly criminal. We must reluctantly admire True Blue's expertise in having found a Politically Incorrect target to pick on. Had True Blue taken to denouncing China, Japan, Indonesia, Israel or the Arab nations, Canberra-based heavies would have condemned any such adverse criticisms as 'racist'. Even Britain and America are no longer the Aunt Sallies that they were pre-Blair and pre-Clinton. But how many divisions has New Zealand got? How many *people* has New Zealand got? (Fewer than Melbourne, actually.) Moreover, for numerous Australians, New Zealanders fill the same psychic need which Australians themselves fill for numerous Britons. That is, New Zealanders can be publicly humiliated here—as Australians can be by Fleet Street—in terms which, if applied to duskier-skinned and more truculent ethnic minorities, would violate all race-relations statutes. The importance of such a soft target shouldn't be undervalued, given the bile levels which True Blue displays. Conceive of what mischief its motormouths could wreak if they didn't have Kiwis to victimize. There are (ahem) unfortunate 20th-century precedents for the taxpayer-subsidized whipping-up of popular indignation against persons who happen to be of the 'wrong' tribe.

True Blue's propagandists, though, shine less by their mischief than by their ignorance. Someone should gently break the news to Tom Jeffrey, before he treats us to more cant about 'our culture, our history, our traditions,' that

only historical accident prevented Australia and New Zealand from being—to coin a phrase—one nation. (P. P. McGuinness in his newspaper column made this point,⁵ which nonetheless seems to have escaped every other commentator on the judges' ruling.) When Australia's colonies first considered Federation, New Zealand's government wanted to be in on the act. It changed its mind in the 1890s, but that didn't stop our own Constitution's draftsmen from including New Zealand along with

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New South Wales, Victoria, etc., as part of the Commonwealth (see Section 6). Evidently Tom Jeffrey hasn't. Perhaps the ANZ Bank's existence furnishes an equal affront to his rancorously chauvinistic sentiments. With single-issue lobbyists, anything seems possible.

Anything except logic and historical literacy. True Blue wails about Triffid-like invasions of Kiwi product upon our television screens; but it has no qualms whatsoever about facilitating invasions of Australian product upon television screens abroad. (Shades of the US Republican Party's economic doctrine, as noted by British historian Timothy Garton-Ash: an unfettered free market in which, somehow, every American enterprise gets protected.) Additionally, sneers by the nation which produces *Home and Away* at the nation which produces *Xena* are not just dishonest—it's a fair bet that True Blue operatives, for all their nationalist bluster in public, faithfully consumed in private every episode of *Seinfeld*—but artistically dubious.

While *Xena* might not be the 20th century's most edifying creation, it is never the rubbish which so many pseuds

(and even non-pseuds like McGuinness) assert. *Xena's* playfully affectionate treatment of legend rests in the honourable tradition of T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. Its dialogue, like White's, sometimes rises to genuine wit ('I said no copying, Xerox!'). Its periodic hokum is not only deliberate but enjoyable. And in its harmless, intermittently silly but commendably tactful way, it bears messages we can do with hearing afresh: that courage is A Good Thing; that not all the sociologists affixed to all the world's bureaucratic teats can abolish evil; that—to quote Damon Runyon—the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that is where the smart money is. Compare these implications with the *Weltanschauung* of *South Park*—which could be called bastardized Norman Mailer did it not more closely resemble a doodle-pad belonging to Charles Manson.

Yet *Xena* could be the vilest bilge ever to assail TV-addicted eyes, and still True Blue's performance would be unjustified. One of art's central truths—if we jib at deeming TV 'art,' it isn't particularly clear what else we can deem TV at its best—is this: that no great artist seeks to protect his art through any nationalistic *cordons sanitaires*. First-rate artists, and most second-rate artists, simply don't work that way. However patriotic their philosophies (and no more impassioned patriots than Grieg, Sibelius, Smetana, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky have ever existed, outside lunatic asylums), their mental antennæ are so sensitive to their cultural environments that they freely acknowledge precursors whom they admire, whatever those precursors' habitat. Grieg, whose whole creative life was a hymn—implicitly anti-German at that—to Norway, studied in Germany and revered the great German composers. Tolstoy found in Dickens and Carlyle literary pleasures of a kind that no Russian could replicate. Did all this make Grieg and Tolstoy treasonous? Perhaps True Blue would consider that it did. It's hard to imagine this view being shared by anybody more conversant than is your average True Blue ideologue with a cosmos outside one's own navel.

Besides, when we survey pre-19th-century artists (in whom by definition national consciousness could scarcely be even embryonic), the case for protectionism becomes still more ludicrously

weak. Almost every great artist has been a cosmopolitan, if not in behaviour, then in thought: even, or rather especially, when he has also loved his homeland. Handel, that epitome of Saxon beefiness and English stateliness, spent his formative years in Italy and wrote most of his operas to Italian words. Milton, far from being parochial in his puritanism, rejoiced in his Italian literary forebears. Dr Johnson was entirely conversant in Italian and French. These three could no more have pleased True Blue than Shakespeare could have done.

It was, however, left to a figure of our own century, Richard Strauss, to provide the wittiest and shrewdest refutation of 'local content' bully-boys, wherever they manifest themselves. He did so while assuring his librettist friend Stefan Zweig, a Jew, that he shared Zweig's contempt towards Nazi artistic nationalism. 'For me,' Strauss wrote, 'there are only two types of people, those who have talent and those who haven't ... It's all one to me if they come from China, Upper Bavaria, New Zealand or Berlin. Provided,' he could not resist adding, 'that they've paid full price at the box office.' Such a remark emphasizes anew how long and dusty a road True Blue's functionaries must travel before attaining comparable creative insight. Meanwhile, they might at least stop pretending that wharfie-like job-preservation rorts denote aesthetic virtue. They might even let the rest of us watch *Xena* in peace.

NOTES

- 1 Kelly Burke, 'All black and blue,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1998, page 15.
- 2 Michael McKinnon, 'Kiwi TV is dinky-di,' *The Advertiser*, 29 April 1998, page 3.
- 3 Burke, *op. cit.*
- 4 Adrian Rollins, 'Industry outrage at NZ ruling,' *The Age*, 29 April 1998, page 3.
- 5 P. P. McGuinness, 'A common market with sunny days and Blue Sky ahead,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1998, page 19.

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I P A

The 'R' Files

ALAN MORAN

Energy and the Environment: Nuclear Power in Australia

THE CITY OF CHURCHES AS A MARKET FOR A NUCLEAR FACILITY

February of this year marked both the death of Don Dunstan and the letting of a contract by the South Australian Government for a new gas-fuelled power station at Pelican Point. The power station, eventually to reach a capacity 500 MW, is about the minimum size for a commercial nuclear power station. The go-ahead marks a postponement, perhaps an indefinite postponement, of a nuclear power facility in Australia.

Before succumbing to the new Labor orthodoxy of opposition to nuclear power in any form, Don Dunstan was an energetic campaigner for the nuclear industry in his State. With the wave of nostalgia for the dark satanic mills that infected the Labor Party after its disastrous foray into government under Whitlam, his successors barely managed to salvage the building of the world's largest uranium mine at Roxby Downs. Previously, Dunstan had commissioned work which purported to show that a South Australian nuclear industry would create half a million new jobs in the State.

South Australia is the State least favoured by fossil fuels. Its coal is of poor quality and badly located. Its gas is at the State's remote north-east region. Something like one-third of its electricity is already imported from Victoria. Proposals to build another line from NSW were wrecked on the shoals of an electricity regime in the process of shifting from a centrally planned to a market system.

The hard core of electricity supply is best generated by massive stations using coal or nuclear as their fuel. In the eastern Australian States, a newly constructed base-load coal station can gen-



erate at a cost of \$35 to \$40 per megawatt hour. Nuclear costs in France and Canada are at the high end of this. Gas-fired units would be a little more expensive but can be operated to take better advantage of peak-demand requirements.

ADD THE GREENHOUSE FACTOR

The greenhouse juggernaut, commenced with exaggerated estimates of global temperature changes as a result of industrialization and increased affluence. The conferences and resolutions have continued for a decade. Targets have been set, notwithstanding the only reliable measure of global temperature trends, the NASA satellite data, showing obstinately stable temperatures since readings began in 1979.

The most recent major milestone in the saga was the Kyoto Conference in 1997, which set "firm" targets for emission reductions. The targets are illusions because it is inconceivable that the US Congress will endorse any measure with adverse economic impacts. Moreover, developing countries, where most of the growth in emissions will occur, are also adamantly opposed to limiting their emissions to meet any greenhouse targets.

All this said, there are no guarantees that governments won't tilt at the windmill targets. At Kyoto, the Australian Government agreed to limit Australia's growth in emissions to 8 per cent by 2010. The estimated increase

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