

## Comments on Screen Australia's Draft Statement of Intent Greg Ricketson

While appreciating that this is a broad draft statement of intent of “broad principles only” with consultation and development of detailed policy and assistance programmes to come, an important opportunity for SA to express some bold new thinking and demonstrate industry leadership seems about to be squandered.

There are many good observations and comments put forward, (some perhaps more appropriate for the next more detailed stage). Whether one agrees or disagrees with Martin Cooper's passionate appeal to put the interplay between the film industry and the video games industry on the agenda for discussion through inclusion in the SOI, I have to agree with his closing comment on lost opportunity which pretty well sums up this draft :

*“The SA SOI is a good starting point. The current document is merely a repeat of the charter of the agencies that have gone before and using the same tired language – now is the time to embrace fundamental change not just a new financing mechanism” (Martin Cooper comments, 17<sup>th</sup> September)*

With only a few minor exceptions, the draft SOI does NOT set out “a new direction for Screen Australia”, and provides neither an enhanced communications network, nor any detailed directions, even as “thoughts in progress”, to most of the priority expectations expressed by the Minister.

### **1. “Balance between cultural objectives and encouraging growth of a more competitive screen industry”.**

A number of all encompassing questions. Just how is the ‘industry’ to be defined by the amalgamated SA ? Just what are the ‘cultural objectives’ ? What does ‘competitive screen industry’ mean ? What is the definition of the ‘screen industry’.

These are issues that have been discussed and argued for over 30 years now that need to be revisited and rethought by a new organisation operating in a totally new environment. Surely the SOI is precisely the forum to define just what these issues are, point to some preliminary directions, and indicate a

process to be followed to reach intended objectives. The SOI is virtually silent on these most critical of questions.

**2. *“More strategic and innovative approach to industry support”.***

The SOI floats some broad ideas that are being considered that are to be welcomed. It is both disappointing, and frightening, that these ideas are in their infancy, with a massive amount of work and consultation to be achieved in what is now less than 12 weeks.

12 weeks for the most important review of a critical industry for more than 30 years !

The SOI gives no indication of just how this is to be achieved, when it will commence, and under what frames of reference for consultation. This does not create great industry confidence that such a full and critical review of all operations, in consultation with all stakeholders, can be achieved by effectively mid-December.

**3. *“Provide supplementary funding to Offset projects ‘of cultural merit only’....”***

I have been unable to find any reference whatsoever in the SOI that even remotely attempts to address “cultural merit”. As commented at 1., this is surely a broad motherhood principle that should be addressed in some way in the SOI ?

**4. *“Be responsible for the development of areas of particular public interest and cultural merit”***

Largely the same comment as for 3.

**5. *“Funding for documentaries should be maintained at least at the levels of support for the industry, including support for documentary film makers and first time film makers”***

This is another critical top level and overarching issue that is not addressed at any great length in the SOI. It is universally agreed that all assistance for Documentary filmmaking should be reviewed from virtually the ground up from a fresh piece of paper.

One of the major flaws of the Producer Offset is the “one glove fits all” approach in the legislation. Sadly, whichever way one fiddles around with figures and financial models and the like, the advantages and usefulness of the Offset are negligible for most documentaries, indeed in some instances a negative by leveraging budgets due to offset financing.

The amalgamation of Film Australia, the issue of the National Interest Program and the resources attached to it, ownership of, and continued access to, the FA archival resources, the Ministers instruction that funding levels must be maintained, all point to a complete review of all aspects of documentary filmmaking.

The only attention for documentary in the SOI relates to Film Australia projects ; floating the idea of a “commissioning model” to replace the FA “executive producer” model; perhaps changing assessment processes; and perhaps introduce tendering processes. These ideas are welcomed, and will no doubt lead to very wide comment during industry consultation.

It seems quite extraordinary to me that the SOI states that no review is considered necessary for other existing assistance and arrangements for domestic and international documentary. This seems completely contradictory to industry opinion, indeed the views of some SA staff.

**6. “Ensure that any efficiency gains from the merger are used to increase support for the industry, including support for documentary film makers and first time film makers”**

This a very direct statement from the Minister, yet there are only nine lines in reply in the SOI. There have been many comments regarding bureaucratic processes and inefficiencies (none better than Screen Hub, 19<sup>th</sup> September). Detailed suggestions of solutions would take several pages, and are more appropriate to the next stage.

The SOI does not seem to be feeling the current political breezes emanating from Canberra across all Ministeries : it is completely inadequate to state in the SOI that “SA will, over time, seek to benchmark its level of administration costs and overheads against comparable international agencies”.

Those benchmarks are clearly available right now, and the SOI should be showing industry leadership in publicly declaring those targets and opening them up for industry discussion and public scrutiny.

**7. “Foster innovation both in content creation and in building sustainable screen businesses across the audiovisual sector to improve engagement with new technologies; to develop creative talent and create new business models.”**

This raises very similar motherhood issues as in 1. That should be at the heart of the SOI. How would SA define “screen businesses”, the “audiovisual sector” and “engagement with new technologies and audiences”. There have been numerous comments on these questions, but virtually no comment in the SOI.

At the very least, SA through the SOI should be providing very clear directions of just what type of “screen business” activity will come under the SA assistance umbrella. As someone else commented, the rather quaint “new media” was all well and good when a program under that name was introduced in 1987, but 20 years later it is high time SA gives some definitions to words used by the Minister.

**8. “Take an active role as Australia’s designated competent authority for the purposes of co-production arrangements...”**

It is extraordinary that an industry issue as critical as ‘co-production’ is lumped together in the SOI with “Administering the Producer Offset”. The two being given a total of 5 lines ! With no statement of intent or indication of importance of co-pros as a crucial financing model for the future.

The SOI is completely silent on a number of other matters specifically included in the Minister’s expectations. Like the Minister, and many others in the industry, I would like to know the SA position as regards :

- *“develop and maintain effective relationships with key stakeholders, in both the public and private sectors”*
- *“take active steps to secure revenue from sources other than Government, in order to increase the revenue base for Screen Australia”*
- *“development of effective strategic planning documents containing relevant and measurable performance indicators, risk management strategies and a performance monitoring framework”*

Will the SOI in any way address these expectations, and any resultant documentation made public ?

**SOME QUICK COMMENTS ON OTHER COMMENTS !**

- I am out of time, so it is quicker to make some comments on comments, and provide more detail in the next stage.
- Martin Cooper’s comments should be explored further in the context of just what constitutes “screen businesses” and where the lines are drawn of type of screen business that SA can support.
- I am surprised at the limited number of references to Script and Project Development being akin to “Research and Development” and the high levels of importance placed in R&D by industry. The SOI is to be applauded for

floating some fresh ideas for further public discussion. The broader issue of R&D stimulation by Government should be explored further by SA as an important policy issue.

- See Saw (SS) makes some terrific comments as regards the requirements for a “mature industry”. While I agree with the concept of “reward” floated in the SOI, I disagree with the SS comments. I feel that the most appropriate “reward” that can be provided is flexibility of recoupment structures that allows producers to develop more adventurous finance models.
- The SS comments on the absurdity of restricting producers to “one active project” are spot on.
- I totally agree with the SS co-production comments under “production financing”, and that the Offset alone will never secure film financing.
- I share SS reservations about marketing support. I agree with the in principle approach of the SOI to be explored further, but am cautious of formula driven assistance perhaps locking in good money being spent when inappropriate.
- Disagree with SS comments regarding the Producer Margin. With some tweaking, and adjustments to recoupment corridors, can be very effective, even at 2/3.
- Screen Hub : in total agreement. I would love to pay some part in helping explore this further.
- I totally agree with Stefan Moore’s comments regarding SA taking on the Offset financing role for documentaries
- SA ongoing support for Screenrights is absolutely required.
- Totally agree with Jeremy Bean’s comments in full (29.09) regarding learning from past successes and failures, data etc. It certainly would be encouraging to see analysis of past assistance programs used as least as a guide for future programme development.

Am out of time, so will have to leave it there. Some further comments will come through later this evening that I hope can be included, but if not, will form a part of the next round.

My apologies for numerous typos.....I haven’t the time to review and correct.

Greg Ricketson  
Austasian Films  
Mobile : 0417-268 136