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## **Film and TV inquiry a mixed bag for the industry**

A Parliamentary inquiry report into the film and TV industry is a mixed bag that includes some sensible proposals but is captive to commercial and ideological self-interest, says MEAA, the union for Australian performers and screen crew.

While there are some positive recommendations about reforming tax incentives, MEAA chief executive Paul Murphy said the inquiry had proven to be a missed opportunity for rational change.

“We are disappointed that our members gave evidence in good faith but ended up with a dose of conservative ideology,” he said.

“The committee was charged with examining sustainability of the film and TV sector but instead managed to propose new ways of destabilising local content, principally by hitting children’s content and local job protections.”

MEAA welcomes the overall thrust of the recommendations to reform the tax offsets for content production, but is concerned about the impact they will have on local film.

The recommendation to lift the television production offset from 20% to 30% is a good one, but it is undermined by the proposed reduction of the feature film offset from 40% to 30%.

“By recommending a reduction of the feature film offset, the committee is penalising part of our industry,” Mr Murphy said.

“This would only make it even harder for Australian film producers to attract local and foreign investment.”

Other proposed reforms, particularly the increase of the location offset from 16.5% to 30% and its decoupling from the already competitive 30% post, digital and visual effects (PDV) offset, are sensible, as is the reduction of the location offset threshold for non-feature pilots to \$5 million.

It has become increasingly clear that the tax incentives currently on offer have made Australia uncompetitive, particularly when bidding for overseas productions. It is pleasing that the committee has recognised the importance of offshore productions as both a source of employment and in helping to keep Australia at the cutting edge of world-class technology and skills.

The committee’s recommendations on local content are also mixed.

MEAA agrees with the proposal that a percentage of Australian revenues of subscription video on demand services be spent on creating new Australian content. It also makes sense that “first release” be redefined to mean anywhere in the world, including New Zealand.

But in its approach to children’s TV content, the committee has shown itself to be captive to commercial interests.

The commercial TV networks have called for the abolition of children’s content quotas, and the committee has fallen into line.

📍 PO Box 723 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012 ☎ 1300 656 513

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Its proposed children's TV fund is an inadequate replacement for the quotas. As the UK experience has demonstrated, the removal of children's quotas will inevitably lead to a reduction in new programming for children, with a flow-on effect for jobs.

In addition, the proposal that a children's TV quota be included in the ABC charter, while attractive at face value, comes with no recommendations for increased funding to allow the ABC to meet that obligation. The inquiry was also a missed opportunity to recommend additional funding to the public broadcasters and Screen Australia.

The most concerning lapse of the inquiry is its narrow and ideological focus on the approval mechanisms for the employment of foreign actors on Australian film and TV productions.

No credible evidence was presented to demonstrate that the short consultation period required for importing foreign actors had any negative impact on the industry.

The role of MEAA in this process is to not only ensure that Australian actors are being given opportunities, but that those foreign actors who are employed receive the same rights and conditions as local workers.

"There is absolutely no evidence that the current process has hindered or deterred investment in the film or television industries," Mr Murphy said.

"It is an efficient process that provides the necessary safeguards to ensure that opportunities are offered to local actors.

"The simple message the committee should have listened to is: if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

"Instead, it is disappointing that the Liberal and National Party members who were the committee majority couldn't resist partisan anti-union attacks on foreign actor certification."

A final disappointment is that the committee recommends focusing solely on small businesses in discussions about the high levels of mental health problems in the industry. It is essential that discussions on safety will include all workers and their representatives.

**Media contact: Mark Phillips, communications director – ph 0422 009 011; email [mark.phillips@meaa.org](mailto:mark.phillips@meaa.org)**

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