

THE HECTOR CRAWFORD MEMORIAL LECTURE
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PHILLIP ADAMS AO

Hector Crawford. Named for the Trojan prince. Presumably his parents also considered other classical heroes – Rome’s Horatio, the Carthaginian Hannibal or Hercules, son of Zeus. On balance I think Hercules might have been a better fit given Hector’s herculean efforts to get local drama onto Australian television. I first met Hector in the mid-fifties, hours before television was introduced to this country and years after the Americans and British had managed to crush what was left of an Australian film industry through their ownership of Hoyts and Greater Union.

My focus would be on film – not on a film industry as such – but on the feature film as creative expression for individual filmmakers and for national aspirations. Working with my partner in cultural crime Barry Jones, our inspiration was more the films of Sweden and the courage of filmmakers in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. And the arguments we would put to John Gorton were unashamedly patriotic, nationalistic and, let it be said, anti-American.

Around a hundred and fifty million people died in wars and genocides in the 20th century. Had the Third World War not been narrowly avoided that figure might have increased tenfold. Nationalism and patriotism, exacerbated by newly minted ideologies, racism and old religions, created the greatest charnel house in history. Statisticians will tell you, despite what seems to be evidence to the contrary, that these early stages of the 21st century are a period of comparative calm. At least according to the body count. But as we stumble and fumble about in its early stages notions of nationalism and patriotism still represent a far greater danger to human sanity and survival than the current pandemics of HIV and Ebola.

Yet, today, I am going to urge you to be patriots and nationalists. Because despite the blurring of borders created by corporate globalization and recent technological wizardries, it is only old-fashioned nationalism that can inculcate public and political support for an Australian film industry. I will suggest to you that your future survival must be predicated on the appeals that Barry and I used in the past. The secret for the survival of an Australian industry begins and ends with that all-powerful word. Australia.

Despite my ambivalence about patriotism I’ve been in the tub-thumping business for 60 of my 75 years. I’m now the oldest pundit in the employ of The **Australian** newspaper. One of the oldest broadcasters at the **Australian** Broadcasting Commission. I’ve headed Film **Australia**, the **Australian** Film Institute and the National **Australia** Day Council, chosen **Australians** of the Year, persuaded Qantas to write The Spirit of **Australia** on their umpteen aircraft. I set up **Advance Australia**, an outfit to cajole Australians into buying Australian. Yet in the same breath, when I hear Abbott talk **Team Australia** I feel like joining Barry McKenzie in projectile vomiting. Because you’d need a tin ear not to recognize

that **Team Australia** is code for a Whiter **Australia**, a more Christian **Australia**. The film industry exists because government called it into being, persuaded by patriotic arguments. Lose the support of the **Australian** government and this whole enterprise vanishes, like picnickers at Hanging Rock, and we revert to the cinematic terra nullius of the 1950s and 60s.

Film, for most of its 100-year history, has been the most political form of expression. When Barry and I arrived in Moscow, whilst circumnavigating the planet on a mission from Gorton, we learnt that Lenin, having recognized the potential of the medium, had within minutes of the Bolshevik revolution created the VGIK, the film school in Moscow. Hitler? The triumph of his will required the films of Leni Riefenstahl. And as I used to write in the 60s MGM was every bit as important to the USA as the CIA – the ‘dream factory’ of Hollywood producing the ‘soft power’ that would mould the imaginations of pretty much the entire human population. Around the world people would drag the Trojan Horse of American films into their cinemas – and with the arrival of television, into their homes. More than any other pop cultural factor, it was cinema that persuaded us to mimic America in everything from food to fashion to foreign policy. American soft power, overwhelmingly spearheaded by movies, would aid and abet the American program leading to political, financial and even military dominance. And while Stalin was controlling and censoring Soviet cinema Washington was doing pretty much the same in Hollywood through the Hayes office and later the efforts of HUAC and McCarthy. To make sure that US films served the political purposes of Team America.

Authoritarian governments and their democratic counterparts always knew that film was a two-edged sword. Hence the mayhem of the McCarthy years, hence the decision of South Africa’s apartheid government to delay the introduction of television for decades. God forbid that black Africa should see western television when every other program provided evidence of comparatively successful integration of white and black.

Even in amiable England film was employed as the most powerful propaganda tool – keeping up the British pecker during the Blitz. Within moments of his abdication the Duke of Windsor was cutting secret deals with Hitler to be plonked back on the throne following a Nazi takeover. And a great many of the most influential member of the British aristocracy were similarly inclined. Yet the British working class felt very differently – and one of the reasons they gave wholehearted support to a beleaguered Winston Churchill was, yes, patriotic films by the likes of Noel Coward.

Meanwhile, here, we’d allowed the British and the Americans to crush our own industry. When it came to cinema – and this situation would extend well into the first decades of television – we were effectively censored. We gave new meaning to the term silent film because we had no film. And you can’t be more silent than that.

It has long amused and frustrated me that we focus our energies and identities on anachronistic associations with Britain – a Britain reduced from imperial

magnificence to an enfeebled Commonwealth with a monarchy little more than a theme park of increasingly creaky and rheumatic rides. The real issue is not with a redundant monarchy but with a powerful republic. And I'm one republican who wants to see our humiliating and groveling relationship with the United States our focus. Forget the Windsors. Worry about Washington.

Film projectors project so much more than film. They project ideas and ultimately belief systems. Ours is a country with comparatively sane gun laws. We do not drown in mass-marketed religiosity. Nor do we see the theory of evolution as blasphemy. Women here have the right to choose. Thanks to a campaign energized by Barry Jones we have long since abandoned the death penalty – whilst the US – most notably Texas – maintains an assembly line to deliver victims of a racist legal system to the execution chamber. In so many ways Australia was and remains light years ahead of the US in its social attitudes. Yet we allow ourselves to acquiesce to insane American laws regarding drugs and we have increasingly echoed their law and order rhetoric and legislation. Anybody who doubts for a moment that US film and television hasn't placed a crucial role in this dangerous osmosis simply hasn't been paying attention.

We've increasingly embraced the US political system, turning our federal elections into de facto presidential elections – a process that I was writing about in the age of Robert Gordon Menzies. And we've increasingly allowed our elections to become auctions – competitions between advertising agencies as much as betwixt candidates and policy.

I met with Joan Ganz Cooney when she was launching Sesame Street in New York and remember her compelling observation that Australians absorb American popular culture as if we were made of blotting paper.

And that ends up with us joining the US in its inane, insane and often entirely counter-productive wars. The war in Vietnam, the war in Afghanistan, the wars in Iraq, the wars on drugs and the war on terror. Farces, fiascos and frauds.

Let the record show that my life, like yours, has been measured to a large extent with magnificent American films, plays, novels and music. I believe that the United States sets the highest standards in almost every example of human activity – and the most awful examples. But Hector Crawford and I (and Barry) were united in our belief that we needed a buffer zone to allow Australian ideas and ideals to breathe.

Through the 60s there was no support for an Australian film industry. Indeed, it would be actively opposed by such early license holders as Sir Frank Packer – and just as tenaciously and more surprisingly by the ABC which did everything 'in house'. Outsiders need not apply. As I'd complain at the National Press Club that was tantamount to the National Gallery of Australia hanging only portraits and landscapes by staff painters, artists who work 9 to 5 with holiday pay and superannuation. Imagine the outcry at such a proposition. Yet it suited the ABC just fine. So they were, in an unholy alliance with Packer, doing everything they could to discourage government support.

Nor was there any audience support. How could there be? Since the 1930s there'd been a handful of Australian films and virtually nobody had seen them. Throughout the 60s and the early 70s the Americans dominated TV scheduling and took home 96% of the Australian box office. Leaving 4% for the rest of the world. For the filmmakers, for the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, India, Eastern Europe – and Australia.

It wasn't just the Australian film and television industry that was in the doldrums. In the 60s only 4 Australian plays were professionally produced, 4 in a decade. Generations of Australian actors had lived and died without ever playing an Australian unless you managed to get into the cast of Blue Hill or one of Hector's pioneering radio serials. Our actors were vocal chameleons who could do Noel Coward, Shakespeare or the toffee voices required for the English drawing room comedies imported by J C Williamson. They could make a fist of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams. But the first thing an Australian actor learnt to do was to get rid of his or her embarrassing Australian accent.

There'd been continuous agitation through the 60s for governments to do something, anything, to encourage local film and program makers. But nothing happened, except for one odd law that was passed under mysterious circumstances. It was against the law to run a foreign made television commercial here. Thus the great global brands like Coco Cola and Marlborough had to make commercials locally. They were often frame for frame copies of US originals. And there was the phenomenon of so-called 'ghost crews' – where Australians would go to Los Angeles and pretend to have shot a Coca Cola or Marlborough ad. They'd luxuriate in a hotel for a few days, sign a few forms and fly home – with 100% American ads in their luggage.

Nonetheless this law built up a skill base, particularly with our technicians – the cinematographers who'd later queue up to collect their Oscars – and with would-be feature directors like Ray Lawrence and Fred Schepisi. Many of the most significant names in our film industry learnt the tricks of the trade making ads – and it was much the same in the UK where David Puttnam and friends like Ridley Scott would make the move from TV commercials to fully-fledged features.

But the big breakthrough came when Barry and I returned from our circumnavigation of the planet and I wrote the most influential page of prose of my life. And I want to remind you about it – because it is my belief that the only way forward for our troubled industry is to retrace those steps and make the same arguments loud and clear

My page began with a piece of nudge nudge wink wink plagiarism – the opening statement of America's Declaration of Independence. 'We hold these truths to be self evident.' Yes, it was a joke. But my page was also a declaration of independence. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident. It is time to see our own landscapes, hear our own voices and dream our own dreams.'

Australian filmgoers had rarely seen their own landscapes on a Hoyts or Greater Union screen. They were much more familiar with the American accents than their own. And when it came to dreams? We knew next to nothing of our own history. Our ignorance of Aboriginal Australia was utter – whereas we knew a great deal about the so-called Red Indians. And when it came to dreaming dreams? Even our heroes were fully imported from the US.

Australian fathers were effectively emasculated in the eyes of their kids because they were not Americans.

Hence Barry and I made three recommendations. First, the so-called Experimental Film Fund. The idea was to give money away, in tiny amounts, to anyone who wanted to have a crack at making a short film. I had recently made my first feature on a clockwork 16mm Bolex, for just \$6,000. Called *Jack and Jill A Postscript* it went on to be the first Australian feature to win the AFI awards and the first Australian feature to win the Grand Prix at an international festival. (Yes, a very small international festival – Adelaide-Auckland.) But if I could make a feature for \$6,000 then for \$600 you could at least demonstrate potential talent.

The experimental film fund. Its greatest significance was that it was the first commitment of federal funds into the film industry in living memory. Gorton approved it without even discussing it in Cabinet. Its purpose was to scatter bread upon the water. The best and brightest would emerge and – here's the second recommendation – we'd send them to a shiny bright new film school.

I wanted to base the school on Swinburne's pioneering effort in Melbourne – but this was the one recommendation that Gorton would dismiss. John wanted it in Sydney – imagining a mega-campus which might accommodate all cultural institutions with 'Australian' in their title. The Australian Ballet, the Australian Opera, the National Institute of Dramatic Art. That certainly wasn't Barry's view or mine. We'd noticed that the best film schools were often shambolic little outfits often located in the grottiest part of a city, amidst the rough and tumble of street life.

Film schools were, at the time, immensely popular. The film school movement in the US was about to produce the likes of Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola. All the filmmakers of the Soviet and Eastern Europe were film school graduates. And in the UK plans for film schools were afoot.

But wherever the film school would be built would lead to our third recommendations. The graduates from our film school, who would form themselves into teams, would then be funded – fully funded if necessary – by a Film Bank. The Australian Film Development Commission.

Soon thereafter John lost office, with only the experimental fund in place. It would take 2 more prime ministers before the second and third steps were implemented. Billy McMahon was a waste of space but Whitlam pushed ahead.

In the 60s we learnt quite a bit about how to handle governments from, of all people, André Malraux – a very famous French novelist who was Charles de Gaulle's Minister for the Arts. When Malraux wanted to influence de Gaulle on film policy he'd round up the good and the great of French cinema – the living national treasures like Jacques Tati and Bresson – and the great actors. Because he knew something that all of us know about Australian politicians. Or American presidents. They love being seen in the company of the acknowledged national treasures. But he also said this. Make sure that the President is the Minister for Film. Don't have junior ministers, if you have a junior minister you won't get the money out of Treasury and the idiots will interfere.

We took that advice very seriously and always battled to keep film in the Prime Minister's department or the Premier's department. And as long as that lasted with Gorton, with Whitlam, with Dunstan, with Wran, things went pretty well. But as soon as you were downgraded, Malraux's warnings came true. We started to lose our momentum when junior ministers, particularly political nonentities, were given responsibility for film.

That three-step program worked like a charm. The pent-up creative energy in this country boiled over and within minutes we were a significant filmmaking nation. We famously became flavor of the month, of the year, of the decade as we started winning prizes at major international film festivals, not simply Adelaide Auckland.

At about the same time Don Dunstan called me. As a shiny bright new Premier he'd felt the pulse quickening and wanted to be a part of the Australian film renaissance. So I devised the South Australian Film Corporation which was immediately followed by similar organisations in Victoria, QLD, NSW and even Tasmania. With the passing of the years a few of them failed. But from having been the hardest country on earth in which to make a feature film Australia became the easiest.

But the Americans were not happy. Again and again they set out to destroy us. And it is important that you know how bitter these fights were. The TV channels were forming themselves into networks and telling Hector Crawford and the Government that they couldn't afford Australian drama. And that was almost true. Why? Because they were spending far, far too much on American programming – paying the highest price in the world for US shows. Not simply in per capita terms. Every year the buyers for the networks would go to the US and bid up the prices.

Whitlam agreed to an enquiry into film and television – conducted by Richard Boyer. I kept my evidence for the last day proposing that Australia should have a buying agency – send one person, just one, to the US with a shopping list provided by the networks. He would refuse to pay the inflated prices and, yes, the studio super profits would be eroded. But they'd have to cop it.

Then, back in Australia, we'd hold that auction. The networks would bid on the programs they wanted – and the difference between the price we'd paid in the

US and the price the networks paid here would be used to fund Australian television drama. With all due modesty the Adams plan was simple and elegant.

It was, however, leaked to Hollywood by a recalcitrant member of the Whitlam government – a Minister who enjoyed overly warm relations with the US studios. And Jack Valenti, the head of the all-powerful MPAA (the Motion Picture Association of America – a lobby group which I compare to the National Rifle Association in its ability to influence Washington) immediately hopped on a plane. Not to Australia. To Honolulu.

Valenti had been the bag man for Lyndon Johnson and front man for Hubert Humphrey. He was Democrat Party aristocracy – and had been given the MPAA job as a sinecure. And he was bloody good at it.

Honolulu? Gough was on his way back from a victory lap as prime minister. And Valenti who was 5ft tall baled him up in the VIP lounge and said, 'If the Adams plan is implemented you will never again see an American film or television show. We will slap a total embargo on you.'

His threat was ludicrous. Not even Valenti could have brought it off. Or maintained it. We're talking the *Easy Rider* era when independent production was exploding and the studios were beginning to retreat. But Gough was understandably alarmed and when he returned to Australia told me of the threat. I said, 'But that would be terrific, it would make Australians angry about the Americans and give us what we've always lacked – support of Australian public opinion to back local films.' But for once in his life, Gough chickened out. There was a quick Cabinet meeting and they waved the white flag. I tell this story to show how brutal things can get.

In the years ahead I'd often negotiate with Valenti on Australia's behalf. There was no more talk of total embargos but from time to time Jack would murmur that other Australian exports such as lamb might be rejected. This would happen incidentally when the New Zealanders dared to refuse entry to US nuclear ships into their harbors. Whether it was the soft power of that Trojan horse of film and television or the hard power of war ships, the US protects its interests.

Of course, Australians were more than welcome to become a part of the American film industry. They were perfectly happy for us to be a back lot for their films provided we greased the palms of their producers with tax breaks and bribes. Nor do they mind if an Australian director makes a hybrid film like *Gatsby*. What they can't destroy with a big stick they try with the carrot.

Once the Trojan Horse of American film was inside our cinemas, once its foal was dragged into our homes via television, the Americans were able to use their cultural clout to tell us what to eat, what to wear and what to think – even changing our vernacular. Our best and brightest joined their industry at the cost of the cultural impoverishment of ours.

The reason Australians won support in the late 60s and early 70s was because we argued the Australian case. To see our own landscapes, hear our own voices, tell our own history, celebrate our own heroes. That and that alone gave us political leverage. It was never an argument about employment levels. It was never an argument about an industry as such – and support for industries, these days, doesn't go down too well. Ask far more significant operations like the auto industry. If Canberra will cop the political pain and close them down they're hardly likely to lose much sleep over the complaints of local film producers.

If you are to win ongoing support from government – and it matters little what brand of government you're dealing with these days – the only weapon you have has Australia written on the blade. It is still the most powerful word, whether used as noun or adjective. It's what saves the Australian Broadcasting Commission from the constant assaults of the Australian newspaper. It is what draws attention and funding to Australian Opera, Australian Ballet and pretty much anything else with Australia in its name.

It is time to wheel out the big guns in Australian culture – not only from the first rank of Australian filmmakers and actors but also from Australian literature. We are still reeling in delight from the fact that another Australian has won the Man Booker prize – my friend Richard Flanagan now joins the ranks of Carey and Keneally. Activate them. All three have passionate commitments to Australian film. Alert the Australian painters as well. In fact, we've got much to learn from the painters and the writers who've been more successful than the filmmakers in achieving local market share. Whilst 95% of the box office still goes to American films Australians overwhelmingly prefer to buy Australian paintings – and the list of bestselling books in this country invariably have a few Australian novels on them.

I walked away from any involvement in film 10 or 15 years ago. I closed down my production houses, resigned from my committees and have avoided commenting on film politics since then. I was dragged reluctantly to this lectern. But in my heyday I was remarkably successful in getting money out of state and federal governments. And the techniques that Barry and I employed then have urgent relevance now.

I used to joke that Australia only rhymed with failure – which isn't much help if you're trying to write a national anthem to compare with 'the Marseillaise'. Even our unofficial anthem, 'Waltzing Matilda', is a woeful ditty. Though it claims to tell the story of a jolly swagman it ends with the poor bloke drowning himself in a billabong over, of all things, a sheep. And failure resonates in so many of our early films. In *Peterson* Jack Thompson wants to succeed at university but finishes up repairing TV sets. In *Sunday Too Far Away*, Jack fails in his ambition to be gun shearer. In *Gallipoli* we finish up losing the war. Phar Lap dies, probably murdered. In Peter Weir's early feature *The Cars That Ate Paris* there's a dying cadence and in *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, which Barry Humphries once called *The Cars That Ate Children*, Miranda and her mates are never found again. Whilst Alvin Purple runs in the opposite direction from sexual encounters, Barry McKenzie runs towards them but remains a virgin. *The Getting of Wisdom* was as

ironic a title as *The Lucky Country*. In *Don's Party* the guests gather to celebrate an election only to see Gough defeated. I remember a French audience at Cannes, who'd spent the first hour thoroughly enjoying *Burke and Wills*, flouncing out enraged when they realised the explorers are going to die in the desert.

Let us hope the Australian film industry does not end, once more, in failure. Dying in the desert. If it is, however, to have a happier ending its advocates mustn't be fooled into collaborating with the bureaucracies by arguing in their terms.

It is time to form another Team Australia. Based not on dog whistle calls to bigotry but on expressing the sort of cultural and political idealism that was so exhilarating in the glory days of Whitlam. It is time to call upon the pantheon of Australia's creative producers, filmmakers, writers, painters, pundits, public intellectuals and sympathetic polliés – anyone and everyone who can be recruited to the cause. I hold this truth to be self-evident. Our film industry was created with government largesse in the early 1970s. And I'm sure that Hector Crawford would agree with me when I state the bleeding obvious and say it cannot live without it.

(4,314 words)

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