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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties Inquiry into the Australia US Free Trade Agreement (USFTA)

Written by Martha Ansara

I am a documentary film producer of over thirty years experience, with numerous Australian and international awards, including the Australian Film Institute's Byron Kennedy Award. I have served on many industry committees. I am also a historian of the Australian cinema, currently lecturing in media arts at the University of Technology, Sydney.

I appreciate this opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties on the US Free Trade Agreement (USFTA). Amongst my colleagues within the film industry, there is widespread concern about the effects of the FTA on our future, in particular, and on Australian culture and society as a whole. Unfortunately, it is now regarded as a done deed by most of my associates who tell me despairingly there is no point in making a submission. The government has made up its mind. I remain an optimist and hope that this committee will note that it has been a difficult climate in which to consult fully with the many groups of Australians adversely affected and make its recommendations accordingly.

I am surprised that, unlike Canada, and despite all the evidence of need, Australia failed to secure an over-all cultural exemption in the FTA negotiations. I think the case in terms of the film and television industries and new media was so well-argued prior to the final negotiations that it seemed unthinkable that any government loyal to its own people would agree to trade away our

cultural autonomy in an area so dominated by American programs. Of particular concern is the fact that new services or areas not specifically named in the agreement are to be automatically covered by the terms of the agreement. This means that future Australian governments will not be free to respond to developments in new media although media is evolving in unanticipated way – changing even as I write this submission and you then read it.

As a teacher of young people, I am witnessing a move to new media that is taking place with unprecedented rapidity. It is coming into use by young people faster, by far, than the take-up of television which we witnessed in the 1950s and early 60s. And we all know now, with hindsight, that had it not been for our freedom to regulate television content we would not have any film industry to speak of. Certainly we would not have drama production. The relative costs are about 5 to 1 in favour of the overseas programs which come to us with all their well-advertised stars. Moreover, since the demise of radio serials, it has been television drama which has kept the acting profession alive, along with work in commercials.

Indeed, it was the advent of 100% local content rule for television & film commercials in 1960 which became the backbone of our production industry. Its loss is certainly one factor in the current slump. While we congratulate ourselves on sending all those actors, directors and cinematographers to Hollywood, we should not forget how they managed to get the training and work to hone their skills – nor why they persistently work overseas as there is already relatively little work for them here.

It is clear to all of us who work in the area that to foreclose the necessary regulation of new media is to condemn us to a cultural future which will be unable to sustain Australian production at a professional and competitive level. For us, there is no level playing field.

Moreover, in already existing areas of media, it appears that despite the need for even stronger content regulation and support

right now, once the FTA is signed we are doomed to keep our regulation at the current levels, never to increase no matter what our conditions may become.

The screen industry and the popular culture that we have today was hard won from the early 1960s on, created against negativity and a lack of cultural confidence clawed into existence, virtually inch by inch. It ultimately gained the support of politicians from all sides of politics and began to seem somehow “natural”. Yet, before this time, it was said that Australians could not make films, and likewise, often, that we had no worthwhile culture of our own. We should not forget that it was only in 1967 that Australian literature began to be taught in our universities.

Finally, after much campaigning and convincing, we finally began to hear our own voices and see our own people on our screens, learning to value ourselves and our distinctively Australian culture -- our ways of thinking, being and debating. It is sad to think that there are those in parliament today who would now throw this achievement away.

Copyright is another area that is already impacting on our industry and the mooted changes will only place further barriers to our ability to understand and interpret our own history.

Our film and television industry associations have made their detailed submissions to this committee. I urge committee members to think carefully about what they have to say and to remember that there is nothing natural about the cultural confidence we have today. Indeed, it is already being eroded -- without a critical mass of employment, skills and innovation, we cannot sustain ourselves in the long run.

My second area of concern is as an ordinary Australian.

From what I have read about the economic effects of the FTA, the benefits for Australia -- and particularly for ordinary Australians -- are not sufficient to counter the almost certain diminution of the ability of governments to make law and policy in the public

interest. Indeed, it is not at all clear that there will **be** any economic benefit in the long run, at all. I note also the adverse effects of tariff cuts and further loss of manufacturing jobs. What sort of independence and freedom of decision can Australia hope to have under such conditions and with increasing lack of control and development of its own infrastructure.

I am particularly concerned also about changes to Australia's pharmaceuticals system and blood plasma product supplies, the restriction on regulation of services and investment, and the increased US influence on quarantine, GE laws and environmental policy-making.

Again, I note that your committee will be receiving detailed and well argued submissions on these matters. I urge you to study them closely and to have the courage to reject the US Free Trade Agreement as not in the interests of the people of Australia.

Yours sincerely,

Martha Ansara
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