

Bill 11 broadens AMPDC mandate

A long time ago the Alberta government chose to emphasize the economic aspects of the province's film and video industry, rather than the cultural ones. "Our department gets more involved in the filmmaking that's designed to be marketed," says Larry Shaben, the minister of Economic Development and Trade.

The Alberta government was a pioneer, setting up the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation (AMPDC) in 1981 to strengthen the indigenous industry. "AMPDC set an example for subsequent boards across the country," brags the minister. And now the government is taking a further step. It is amending its Motion Picture Development Act to greatly improve the financial picture for Alberta's business-minded film and video industry.

The industry has taken the government's cues. "Our industry is organized on the private enterprise model," says Allan Stein, the president of Alberta's Motion Picture Industries Association. "We try to justify ourselves as businesses. But we're also on a cultural mission. We talk apologetically about the fact that we're a cultural industry. We don't have to be apologetic - we simply produce culture."

But 'culture' is a bad word in Alberta. Even though the arts contribute significantly to the provincial economy, they are all but ignored. Pam Barrett, the house leader for Alberta's official opposition, claims the government cut up to 73 per cent off the culture budget last year. The government also renamed the department from Alberta Culture to Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, de-emphasising the arts.

Barrett not only moans the fact that the Getty government is so tight-fisted with money; she is also concerned with political favoritism. "We're leaving it very much up to the government to determine who gets the money, and how much. If we had an independent film and video foundation with elected board members we wouldn't have a problem."

Still, she could be making things worse, since AMPDC probably has fewer ties with the government than Alberta's various arts funding foundations. The foundations now provide most of the funding to the arts in Alberta, but are government controlled and funded. Barrett admits: "Compared to what's been going on, with the political direction that the foundations are told to follow, AMPDC is now an illuminating leader in the field."

Meanwhile, the government has introduced bill 11, the Motion Picture Development Amendment Act, which is expected to receive royal assent this month. The bill will broaden AMPDC's mandate to provide minority equity in Alberta film productions, expands its capital from \$3 to \$10 million, and extends the term of the bill indefinitely (the Corporation was initially only an eight-year experiment).

The AMPDC is extremely pleased because "it radically increases the amount of funding producers can leverage from other sources," says Gary Toth, director of project administration. "Alberta will see a dramatic increase in production as a result."

Bill 11 in effect turns AMPDC into a 'real' business, and there's a gleam in Shaben's eye when he says: "AMPDC can now build the size of their capital if they're wise in their investment." And if they do poorly? "That's a risk that any venture capitalist group takes," says Toth. "It's an extremely high-risk business, but we're here to develop the industry. There are going to be losses but there are also going to be gains."

The industry will have a say in how the money is invested. To assure a degree of control over the corporation, says Shaben, AMPDC "established an advisory committee from whom they seek advice." This board consists of people from the industry, and always includes the president of the Motion Picture Industries Association, in this case, Stein.

Stein is happy with the bill. "We have wholly endorsed the concept of AMPDC as an equity participant." But he adds that more government development is needed, not from Economic Development, but from Culture and Multiculturalism.

"AMPDC is clearly not a cultural agency. It is an economic agency. We've always thought that a Film and Video foundation would be an appropriate parallel to the Performing and Literary Arts foundations, since AMPDC addresses only part of our needs."

"We need a foundation, or some other support mechanism, because if we continue as we are now, it (the industry) is going to be a closed clique. We need to bring up new people, support them between the time a kid graduates and the point where the AMPDC becomes useful to him. We need to provide a base."

The province hasn't shown too much interest in culture over the past few years, and it's doubtful they'll change their business-oriented approach. Still, Stein is hopeful the government will invest in culture too.

"The private sector model doesn't fully address the needs of our industry. We hope that all these government support systems are just training wheels. But Canada has a very small population base, and Alberta's is even smaller. The government must be prepared to have some of the industry supported from the tax base."

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