

The wedding that wasn't. Aotearoa wooed — and jilted

How the ABS application came about has never been ascertained exactly. Former BCNZ chairman Ian Cross, immediately after the change of government, approached Hunt with the idea of a BCNZ-backed Maori third channel as a branch of public broadcasting instead of the private commercial third channel the National Government had authorised.

Hunt rejected this; Labour, too, was committed to private competition for TVNZ. But the idea of a Maori third channel had taken root — if Ian Cross could envision it, then it was indeed possible.

The proposals for BCNZ endorsement of the ABS application, the corporation's support in preparing and presenting the case and funding the new channel should it win the warrant came from Aotearoa Broadcasting. But even at that stage it seemed likely that the cash outlays involved would strain BCNZ resources, despite the long-term prospect that the cost would be far less than the likely TVNZ revenue losses to any private commercial operator, should ABS fail to win the warrant.

And this really points to the inherent perils in an arrangement undertaken for all the best reasons. Under the scheme the BCNZ would subsidise ABS by some \$74 million in its first three years on air, although the real cost to the corporation would have been nearer \$100 million as it would have had to pay for the transmission system as well.

The deal for subsequent years underscored the dangerous dependence ABS might have had. In year four onwards the total commercial revenue of TVNZ's two channels and ABS would have been added together and ABS paid 15% of the grand total, less what it had actually earned itself. If TVNZ sold \$180 million worth of advertising and ABS \$20 million for a total of \$200 million, 15% of which is \$30 million, then ABS would have been paid \$10 million. If ABS sold no advertising and TVNZ, without serious commercial competition, reached \$200 million, then ABS would get the full \$30 million.

Critics saw this as encouraging a system in which a financially dependent ABS had no incentive to attract view-

ers, which would have been all to TVNZ's commercial advantage.

As it happened the arrangements were never put to the test; new chief executive Nigel Dick concluded this year that in its present financial state the BCNZ could not afford to have any third channel competition at all. To present that new hardline attitude convincingly to the Broadcasting Tribunal, the corporation could not be seen supporting any applicant, even one it philosophically believed in such as ABS. The ABS failure to raise the \$25 million it had undertaken to find gave the BCNZ the pretext it needed to sever the ties.

Relations between the two bodies quite understandably became acrimonious, to the point that Rennie broke off all personal contact. ABS in turn rejected BCNZ overtures to switch its attentions to radio and the "lame duck" ABS application for the third channel drifted inexorably towards rival ITV.

ITV — backed by Brierley, Fletcher Challenge, Chase and Owens Investments — was the first of the four private third-channel consortia to recognise how much ABS, largely through the up-front advocacy of *Te Karere* presenter Derek Fox, had shown up the inadequacies of all the applicants' token provisions for Maori broadcasting.

Early on ITV proposed an arrangement by which it, if successful, and TVNZ should jointly fund both the establishment and running costs of a special stand-alone Maori production unit, separate from whatever Maori programming either broadcaster might produce in-house, to serve all three channels. It also volunteered an annual \$3 million levy to TVNZ for each hour nightly it devoted on one channel to Maori programming.

It was only a small step for ITV and ABS to reach their current agreement. Although the Broadcasting Tribunal has refused to admit such a belated joining of forces, it suggested that it would entertain the issue of programme warrants, as proposed, after the award of the third channel warrants, and also hinted that it would make firm recommendations on Maori television needs and impose minimum conditions on the warrants when it made its final decisions.

While the other applicants failed to reach agreements with ABS, two others, Southern Cross and Energy Source, have beefed up their original Maori programming proposals although the TV3 group still opts for "mainstreaming" — that is, no specific Maori programming as such but recognition of taha Maori in all its mainstream production.

Coinciding with the BCNZ/ABS row this April, TVNZ under new director-general Julian Mounter moved to make the long-obvious appointment of a head of Maori programming, Ernie Leonard, with a specific department of his own. This so far has seen *Nga Take Maori*, a first venture into subtitled Maori-interest current affairs, added to *Koha* and *Te Karere* and long-term plans for both stepped-up training of Maori recruits into television and affirmative action policies in promoting Maoris wherever possible.

Mounter even demanded that a Maori newsreader be found for the 6.30 news — an edict not carried out in the latest reshuffle of newsreaders, largely because, one suspects, the only likely candidate was Fox, a major voice in ABS whose continuing public reminders of TVNZ's failures in serving Maori needs have earned him the disfavour of both Dick and Mounter.

But Fox remains, largely because the long-serving current affairs reporter and director who took time away from television for a year a decade ago to set up the Te Reo radio unit, remains TVNZ's best qualified Maori broadcaster. And this underlines the problems facing Leonard, aside from being taken seriously after year's fronting, then producing *On the Mat*. A shortage of capable television broadcasters in all craft areas also fluent in the language, although being addressed by special training courses, throws doubt on Leonard's pledge to announce soon programmes that will increase TVNZ's Maori programming by 1100 per cent.

Mounter, however, remains adamant that special emphasis will be given to Maori programming, regardless of cost-cutting elsewhere.

by Warren Mayne