

# FTA to 'reduce cultural voice'

April 19, 2004

Australia's cultural voice would be reduced to a whisper if the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States went ahead, a federal government committee was told.

The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties heard its first public submissions on the proposed FTA at NSW Parliament House in Sydney on Monday.

The Australian Coalition for Cultural Diversity (ACCD), including representatives from the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the Australian Writers Guild, Music Council of Australia and Screen Producers Association of Australia, gave evidence at the hearing.

The ACCD told the committee that the deal would leave Australians with reduced access to local cultural content. The proposed deal caps the amount of local content at existing levels of 55 per cent on free-to-air commercial television and 25 per cent for commercial radio, and at 10 per cent on pay TV.

If the government reduces these content levels, they cannot be raised again.

The deal also prevents the government from regulating local content levels for new media without consulting the US, which can challenge any proposed changes.

McLeod's Daughters actress Bridie Carter told the hearing that the agreement would trade away Australia's cultural identity.

"The negotiators have ensured that we will be able to keep the current regulations," she said.

"But what about forms of media that have not yet been thought of?"

"There will be absolutely nothing to ensure that Australian productions will feature at all on these new media."

Ms Carter said Australia's cultural industries were already struggling against imported products.

"The present regulations, small as they are, prevent us from being totally pulled under," she said.

"The Free Trade Agreement ... threatens to reduce what is left of the vibrant Australian voice to a mere whisper in the future."

Simon Whipp, from the MEAA, said the agreement was a "straitjacket" on the government's ability to promote and support Australian content.