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Welcome Kim Williams, Nick Herd and friends in the screen industry.

I first met Nick in 2003 when Professor Liz Jacka, then a Board member of the infant Currency House, proposed we join UTS and Screen Australia (then the AFC) in a linked ARC research project to gather a data base of everything that was known about Australia's commercial TV and how it worked. Nick was principal researcher and it was 2009 and a PhD later before he was ready to face the task of compressing all this research into a book for the general reader. It has taken another three years to deliver it in the tangible form that we see tonight.

I can't pretend it has been an easy ride. For Nick or Currency House. And he has made a lot of sacrifices on the way. He had a struggle to find a structure that would give the material a form and meaning. But I knew when I read the early material that buried in it was an important story and one that needed to be told. Not the one that most people were expecting, of course, about the protests, the blunders, the scandals, the sharp practices, the libel suits that make up the everyday public space of television today. Sure, that was there; but what *he* understood at the start, and which I came to recognise, was that television, especially commercial television, had been the most transforming force for social change Australia had seen since Federation.

One of the themes that has dominated my own life and writing has been the contradiction between the middle-class aspirations on the British model, which we inherited and which gave our public institutions their structure, and the democratic populist taste which continues to subvert them. Television became the battlefield on which these two forces have been played out, and mostly interpreted as altruism versus greed, but as Nick has benignly demonstrated, truth is more complex than that.

Mostly, the history shows, those with money and influence have won out. But often it was a Pyrrhic victory. Five fateful choices, says Nick, marked the progress of our television: some with good outcomes, others were lost opportunities. If you want to guess the outcome of the Convergence Review, due to be released as soon as Monday, have a look at his account of these choices. History tends to repeat itself, and those with vested interests and capital have mostly blundered though to success of a kind.

It's a history of opportunities and opportunists. Some have been extraordinarily visionary, like the young Kerry Packer, with his World Series Cricket in the 1970s – an empire worthy of Alexander the Great—and with a similarly mixed legacy. Others,

like the TV producer Hector Crawford, almost single-handedly created the drama production industry as it exists today; then the Grundy Organisation carried our melodramas to the rest of the world. Mike Willesee invented the idea of news as entertainment, which still prevails. These are people worth celebrating.

It's not my job here tonight to give a critique of the book. But I'm excited about its revelations and I want people to share them. Currency House is a small not-for-profit organisation, founded to raise the standard of debate on the arts and humanities and uncover the value of those forms of social-expression that are endemic to the Australian way of life. TV seems to me to be the ideal ground for this.

To illustrate what I mean I want to tell a personal story, if you will allow me. My son, Nick Parsons, is a screen writer and was the principal writer on *The Straits*. I had occasion recently to watch, in sequence, an episode of *The Straits* and another of *Spooks*. Being an elderly middle-class woman, I found *The Straits* quite difficult to watch at times, and difficult to defend. I admired its exoticism, its rigour as a revenge tragedy and its constant shocks; but for the most part I sat rigidly, wondering what I had done to contribute to such an imagination. The Macbeth family in the Garden of Eden.

Then I watched *Spooks*. Here the stakes were even higher. A nuclear bomb was about to be dropped on London by a suicide bomber. Only Sir Harry, former lover of a KGB chief's wife, could stop the end of civilisation as we know it. I sat back and relaxed. This was familiar territory. And why did I relax? The tensions were as high and the morality as suspect. But *it wasn't my culture*, my responsibility. I had no stake in turning back that plane, as I did in begging Sissy to turn back her boat and save her drowning lover. That we had in Australia people capable of such evil mattered to me. *I felt responsible*.

So that's why I think our television is important. It saturates this vast country with our stories, both good and evil, as no other form of communication can do. It has brought us consumerism, made us intimate with the faces of politics and protest, built us up and dumbed us down, entertained the lonely, transformed weekend sport into a global industry, broadcast our suburbia around the world. And few in the industry seem to recognise what they have achieved. 'It's only history', more than one person has told me. But it's history we ignore at our peril.

Now it is my pleasure to hand over to Kim Williams, to give us a different perspective on Nick Herd's achievement. As you all know, he has been an executive of the screen industry for many years, both on the commercial and the regulatory side, including founding the Film Finance Corporation in 1986, and holding senior positions in the AFC and the ABC. Recently he escaped from the industry by exchanging his longtime role as CEO of Foxtel for another as head of News Ltd.

Ladies and Gentleman, Kim Williams, AM.