

# Australia: Howard government bans French movie *Baise-moi*

**Mile Klindo**  
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In a serious attack on democratic rights, Australia's Classification Review Board last week banned the controversial French film *Baise-moi* after Federal Attorney General Daryl Williams called on the censorship body to review the film's R18+ (admission to over 18-year-olds) classification. The movie, which was rated by the Office of Film and Literature last October, began showings at selected art house cinemas on April 24 and was seen by over 50,000 people before screenings were stopped. Many of those who saw the film did so in order to demonstrate their opposition to the anticipated ban.

Directed by Virginie Despentes, who wrote the novel on which *Baise-moi* was based, and Coralie Trin Thi, a porn actress, the artistically limited but sexually explicit work attempts to demonstrate how social relations brutalise women. It tells the story of two sexually abused women, one of whom is gang-raped. After a chance meeting, they travel across France picking up men and women for sex and then murdering them.

Valhalla and Chauvel cinema managers in Sydney threatened to continue showing the film last weekend until officially notified of the ban. But they pulled it after New South Wales police visited the theatres on May 12. Anyone screening a banned film in Australia can be fined \$11,000 and jailed for a year, with companies fined up to \$250,000.

According to press reports, Terry Breen, an executive member of the NSW branch of the Australian Family Association (AFA), a rightwing lobby group, contacted police in Surry Hills and Glebe, where the two cinemas are located, and demanded they enforce the Review Board decision.

The campaign to ban *Baise-moi* was initiated by a loose coalition of extreme rightwing parliamentarians and Christian fundamentalist groupings that have long demanded the Howard government introduce stricter censorship guidelines.

Reverend Fred Nile, a NSW state Upper House MP and leader of the Christian Democratic Party, began the push with a letter to Attorney General Williams and Prime

Minister John Howard on April 12, demanding they intervene to prevent the film being released.

Nile, who regularly denounces homosexuals as "evil" and wants anyone satirising the church to be charged with blasphemy, claimed that *Baise-moi* encouraged rape and murder. He was backed by federal MPs, including South Australian Liberal MP Trish Draper, National Party MP De-Anne Kelly and anti-abortionist Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine. In addition to contacting Howard and Williams, they called on Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson to stop the film, claiming it was undermining Christian values. None of those demanding the ban had seen the film.

These moral crusaders are members of the Lyons Forum, a backroom lobby group established in 1992 by Chris Miles and John Bradford. The Lyons Forum wants all sexually explicit films and videos banned. Miles is Howard's former parliamentary secretary, while Bradford is a member of the Christian Democratic Party. The secretive formation, which has links to various extreme rightwing groups, refuses to disclose its membership but has at least 20 federal MPs and 13 senators on its rolls, including some ALP members.

Under Australian law, appeals to the Review Board for the reclassification or blanket censorship of films, literature or other publications can be made by "persons aggrieved" or through state or federal attorneys general. Although interventions by attorneys general are rare, Williams took the unprecedented step of acting directly on behalf of Nile, Harradine, and others because recent applications by "persons aggrieved" to have films banned have been unsuccessful.

Williams' intervention follows a concerted six-year campaign by the Howard government to establish a regressive censorship regime. In 1996, following the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania where an individual killed 35 people, the government called for tougher censorship laws and established the Senate Committee for Community Standards to investigate "violence in the media". The committee declared that "the interest of the community should take precedence over individual liberty".

In 1997, the government passed the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act, which removed all explicit, non-violent adult programs from cable television. In 1998 it banned three films: Pasolini's anti-fascist film *Salò*, a 1978 horror film *I Spit on Your Grave*, and the documentary *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan—Supermasochist* about the US performance artist. In 1999, the government pressured the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations into accepting stricter codes for free-to-air television programming, with sex or nudity banned unless "serious cause and justification" existed.

The same year, the Australian National Gallery axed the *Sensation* exhibition from its program despite announcing a few months earlier that *Sensation* would be the centerpiece of its 2000 program. The gallery decision followed intervention by Communication and Arts Minister Richard Alston. Last year the Review Board reclassified *Pictures*, a book by critically acclaimed US photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, after South Australian police seized the publication from an Adelaide bookshop. The book was reclassified Category 1-Restricted. Police claimed they were responding to public complaints but refused to provide any details.

These measures have been accompanied by the replacement of retiring OFLC classifiers and Review Board members with people who are favourably disposed towards the government's political agenda. Following unsuccessful attempts by the pro-censorship lobby to have Adrian Lyne's film *Lolita* and Catherine Breillat's *Romance* banned in 1999 and 2000 respectively, the government began playing a more direct role in the final selection of OFLC classifiers and Review Board personnel.

The Howard cabinet vetoed six prospective classifiers in 1999, claiming those selected were not representative of "ordinary" Australians, and in 2000 appointed Des Clark OFLC and Review Board director. Clark is a Liberal Party hack and a close friend of minister Alston. As Raena Lea-Shannon from the Watch on Censorship group told the press last week, the OFLC and the Classification Review Board have been "stacked" with new appointees "made to reflect the government's values".

Most members of the six-member Review Board are now senior business personnel. Review Board convenor Maureen Shelley, a former sub-editor for major daily newspapers, is Australian Council of Businesswomen CEO and company director. Other recent appointees include Jonathan O'Dea, a senior insurance manager and private health insurance company director; Dawn Grassick, a microbiologist and industry representative on the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code Council; and Jan Taylor, president of the Queensland branch of the Women Chiefs of Enterprises

International and a member of the Queensland Advisory Committee of the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia. Taylor is also the managing director of a professional development and executive coaching company.

None of these politically conservative elements have any serious qualifications in the fields of art, film and literature. Attorney General Williams simply handed the final decision to ban *Baise-moi* to a body whose membership has been closely scrutinised by the government itself.

Notwithstanding *Baise-moi*'s serious artistic limitations, the film ban constitutes an assault on freedom of expression and the democratic right of adults to read and see what they wish. It is not coincidental that tighter censorship is being introduced amidst a wave of severe cuts to social services. Mindful that these measures will produce growing opposition, the government is attempting to prevent the availability or emergence of subversive or thoughtful artistic work that can enlighten or educate the majority of the population.

While NSW Labor Premier Bob Carr and Victorian Attorney General Rob Hulls—representing states that are home to Australia's major film production and distribution facilities—initially criticised the film ban, their mild protests evaporated within a couple of days. Nothing will come from these quarters to challenge the Howard government's repressive censorship regime. Both governments face elections in the next 12 months and are attempting to secure support from the same layer of Christian fundamentalists and rightwing elements that demanded the banning of *Baise-moi*.



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