



OFFICE OF FILM  
& LITERATURE  
CLASSIFICATION

*Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubituhinga*

## The Life of Brian

Censorship and *The Life of Brian* was hotly debated in New Zealand and overseas in 1980. Christian groups in New Zealand called for the film to be banned before the film had arrived in New Zealand. The Chief Censor of Films Bernard Tunncliffe received more letters about *The Life of Brian* than any other film submitted for classification at that time.

*The Life of Brian* is a satirical film set during biblical times in Judea. The film begins with the birth of a boy named Brian Cohen in a manger and a visit of three wise men. When he grows up Brian joins the People's Front of Judea who are trying to destroy the governing Roman Empire. Brian gives a sermon and people believe that he is the Messiah who can work miracles. He is eventually arrested and sentenced to crucifixion. The film ends with a crowd scene where people join together singing "Always look on the bright side of life..."

*The Life of Brian* was classified according to criteria set out in the Cinematograph Films Act 1976. It required a censor to consider whether a publication was "injurious to the public good" and removed the references to "public order and decency" that were remnants of the Cinematograph Film Censorship Act 1916. The 1976 Act removed the opinion of the censor as the classification criteria and instead required censors to follow specific criteria such as:

- the likely effect of the film on its audience;
- its artistic or other merit;
- whether the film included anti-social behaviour, sex, horror, crime, cruelty, violence;
- whether the film denigrates a particular class of people by reference to their colour, race; ethnicity, sex or religious beliefs;
- the time and place of exhibition.

Correspondents wrote to the Chief Censor of Films Bernard Tunncliffe about *The Life of Brian* before a distributor had brought the film to New Zealand or submitted the film for classification. Many of these correspondents were Christians and had heard about

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*Chief Censor of Films*

the film through religious organisations overseas. They wrote to the Chief Censor claiming that the film was blasphemous and denigrated people with Christian beliefs and "urg(ed) that its screening be prohibited within New Zealand, basing (their) objections on overseas reviews and criticisms". The Chief Censor responded "that it was not blasphemous or sacrilegious... it may be argued that it is in bad taste, but this is a factor, which in terms of the law I am not required to, and cannot take into account".

The film *The Life of Brian* was classified on 18 February 1980 as restricted to those aged 16 years and over (R16). Many correspondents who had requested a ban on the film were upset with the R16 classification. In a letter responding to questions from a Member of Parliament, the Chief Censor of Films said that the theme, the content, and the dominant effect of the film were the reasons that the film had been given a R16 classification.

Some members of the public believed that the film should be banned on one of the grounds in section 26(2)(e) of the Cinematographic Films Act "that the film denigrates any particular class of the general public by reference to ...the religious beliefs of the members of that class". However, the Chief Censor of Films pointed out in a letter to the then Leader of the Opposition that he was required to consider the "...whole sub section(of section 26(2)) containing all the criteria, as well as other relevant sections ....when making any decision to approve or reject any film".



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A petition was launched in July 1980 requesting that the Minister of Internal Affairs withdraw the film from public release. Under the Cinematograph Films Act 1976 members of the general public were not entitled to apply for a review of the film. The Act only entitled the submitter of the film to apply for review by the Films Censorship Board of Review. The petition instead requested that the Minister require the exhibitor to cease exhibiting the film to the public under section 85 of the Act on the grounds that the film was injurious to the public good. While the petition gathered 12,352 signatures it was unsuccessful in convincing the Minister to stop the exhibition of the film.

The petition organisers also sought to convince the Commerce and Energy Committee (a parliamentary select committee) to amend section 26 of the Cinematograph Films Act 1976 and allow members of the public to apply for a review by the Films Censorship Board of Review. The letter to the Committee suggesting the amendments to the Act said that “It is most unfair that exhibitors, who are interested primarily in profits, should have rights which are denied to those amongst the general public who have a genuine concern for, and a sense of responsibility towards the public good”.

#### **Section 85 of the Cinematograph Films Act 1976**

*If, at any time after a film has been approved for exhibition and exhibited in New Zealand, the Minister considers that, having regard to the apparent effect of the film on the general public or on any class of the general public, the further exhibition of the film is likely to be injurious to the public good, he may, by notice in writing, require the exhibitor forthwith to cease exhibiting the film and, may by notice in the Gazette, prohibit the further exhibition of that film.*

There were no immediate law changes allowing members of the public to apply for a review of a classification decision. However, the Video Recordings Act 1987 allowed members of the public, dissatisfied with any decision of the Video Recordings Authority, to apply for reviews before the Board of Review. The right of review in the Video Recordings Act was incorporated into the Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act 1993. Section 47 of the Classification Act allows members of the public to apply to the Film and Literature Board of Review for a review of classification decision.

There were also members of the public who supported the R 16 classification of *The Life of Brian*. One parent wrote to the Chief Censor of Film telling him that they initially thought that the film should be classified lower than R16 because they thought that their 12 year old daughter would have enjoyed most of it however they “commend(ed) (his) refusal to ban it and the rating (he) awarded it”. Another letter to a newspaper editor from Monty Python fans in Lower Hutt pointed out that they were “...distressed by the number of Christians that object to the film and believe that ...if the film upsets them, they shouldn’t go and see it... *The Life of Brian* is purely meant for enjoyment and the only one restriction should be made-only those with a sense of humour need go”. There was also support from other Christians who did not believe the film was blasphemous. An editorial in the Salvation Army magazine *War Cry* said “ ...it is not Christ that is mocked so much as his fallible followers; that the film is satirical...Now if this is true then it is the Church and the powers that be that are being lampooned. Here is no blasphemy, they are not God”.

Overseas classifications for the Life of Brian

United Kingdom R14

United States R17

Australia M- recommended for mature audiences



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## Questions

1. Included below is section 26(2) of the Cinematograph Films Act 1976, how does it compare to section 3 of the Films, Videos, Publications Classification Act 1993 (*This is provided in the NCEA Resource Book*). What differences between the two Acts can you identify? Do you think that *The Life of Brian* would have been classified differently if it was classified under the guidelines of the Classification Act?
2. Which of the criteria in section 26 guided the Chief Censor's classification of the film? If you have seen the film, how would you describe the dominant effect of *The Life of Brian*?
3. How do the review procedures in the Cinematograph Films Act 1976 compare to the review procedures in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993? (*Refer to the Information Sheet on the Board of Review for information on the review procedures in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act*)
4. What are the main concerns of the different public interest groups about the film?
5. Do you think that the concerns expressed at the time *The Life of Brian* was classified would still be held? How does this film compare to other satire or comedy films released today?

### Cinematograph Films Act 1976

#### Section 26(2)

In determining whether any film is or is not likely to be injurious to the public good the Chief Censor shall consider the following matters:

- (a) The dominant effect of the film as a whole, and its likely effect on the audience likely to view the film;
- (b) The extent to which the film has artistic merit or is of value or importance for social, culture or other reasons;
- (c) The extent and degree to which and the manner in which the film depicts, includes, or treats anti-social behaviour, cruelty, violence, crime, horror, sex or indecent or offensive language or behaviour;
- (d) The extent and degree to which the film denigrates any particular class of the general public by reference to the colour, race, or ethnic or national origins, the sex, or the religious beliefs of the members of that class;
- (e) Any other relevant circumstances relating to the proposed exhibition of the film, including the places and times at which or the occasions on which the film is intended or likely to be exhibited.