Three police shows axed in just one year. For some observers, it seemed like much more than a coincidence, writes Jock Given

By 1973, at the end of George Mallaby’s six-years at Homicide, Crawfords had three hits on its hands: Homicide, Matlock Police and Division 4. Crawford Productions Pty Ltd/National Film and Sound Archive

It’s one of the longest-running arguments in Australian television.

For a few years in the early 1970s, Crawford Productions in Melbourne was making a separate weekly police drama series for each of Australia’s three commercial TV networks: Homicide for Seven, Division 4 for Nine, Matlock Police for what we now call Ten.

Then, in a few months between January and August 1975, all three shows were cancelled. Some remember it as a coordinated campaign to cut the pioneer of Australian TV drama, Hector Crawford, and his company down to size. Others scoff at the idea that the three commercial TV networks – enterprises that will do absolutely anything to beat each other every night, every week, every year – would kill good shows to serve some wider, common purpose.

Homicide, first broadcast on Channel 7 in Melbourne in October 1964, was a breakthrough for Crawfords and Australian television. It was the first local show to make it to number one – the most watched TV program in the land. It beat everything from everywhere: American sitcoms and dramas, Hollywood movies, British comedies.

Nine won the ratings overall but two programs on Seven “really got up our noses,” according to Nigel Dick, sales manager and later general manager of GTV 9 in Melbourne in the 1960s: Disneyland on Sunday night and Homicide on Tuesday night.

“We tried everything, but nothing worked,” says Dick. When the Christian evangelist Billy Graham came to Australia in 1968, his tour organisers asked Nine if they would be interested in a live broadcast of Graham’s “crusade” at Randwick Racecourse. Nine told them to schedule it at 7.30 on a Tuesday night and they’d be delighted.

The organisers agreed. Billy Graham on Nine went straight up against Homicide on Seven. “In those days, the ratings came out a few weeks later, and you had to wait,” says Dick. In the meantime, Nine got hundreds of letters thanking them for the wonderful event – social media 1960s style – and sniffed a win at last. When the ratings finally came out, Billy Graham’s crusade had done slightly worse than Nine’s normal Tuesday night program. The weekly murder over on Seven was unbeatable.

Nine had already decided it too needed a crime drama from Crawfords. First, it got Hunter in 1967, then in 1969, Division 4, starring Gerard Kennedy as the detective Frank Banner. Kennedy had won a Logie for best new talent in Hunter and as the star of Division 4 made frequent walks up ballroom stairs to receive best actor awards and two Gold Logies for most popular entertainer.

The third commercial network, Channel 0 in Melbourne and Ten in Sydney, wanted a crime show from...
Crawfords as well. The company resisted, wanting greater diversity in its production slate, but eventually came up with *Matlock Police*. Starting on Channel 0 early in 1971, the program was set in the fictional Victorian country town of Matlock, where the community, the crimes and the style of policing were unlike those in *Homicide* and *Division 4*.

Crawfords now had three hits on its hands. In 1973, *Homicide*, *Matlock Police* and *Division 4* were the second-, third- and fourth-top-rating programs in the country’s biggest and most important TV market, Sydney.

Then 1975 came. In January, Nine announced that *Division 4* would cease production later in the year. Ten followed, announcing the end of *Matlock Police* in July. Finally Seven, in August, declared that after more than a decade on air, production of *Homicide* would cease at the end of the year.

Crawfords had tried to talk one of these networks out of commissioning yet another police drama just a few years before. Now it was left with no cop shows at all. At the once-frantic studios on the old Carlton and United Breweries site in Abbotsford, Australia’s drama pioneer felt itself a victim of bigger forces.

Norman Yemm (left), Gary Day and Bud Tingwell working together in *Homicide* from 1973. Mark Wilson/ The Age

Would commercial television networks kill successful shows?

Since the earliest days of television, Hector Crawford had been a loud and persistent advocate for government action to support the production and broadcast of Australian programs. That put him into conflict with his own customers, the commercial TV broadcasters. Then in the early and mid 1970s, a number of well-known Crawfords actors were prominent in “TV: Make It Australian,” a public campaign to increase the levels of Australian programs on television. The election of a Labor government in 1972 created a more receptive political environment, although Labor’s media policy activism, especially its enthusiasm for new services, was loathed by most commercial media operators.

Crawford had laid out his case in a booklet, *Commercial Television in Australia*, published in 1959, three years after television began. Television could “make a vital contribution to the development of a specifically Australian consciousness and sense of national identity,” he wrote. But Australian screens were flooded with overseas programs, mainly from the United States. Shows made for up to $135,000 an hour were being sold in Australia for a fraction of their production cost. Australian producers, especially of scripted dramas, could not possibly compete. Their audiences were being deprived of the local programming that Crawford argued the people and the politicians had expected from the young medium.

The booklet “caused a bit of a tick-up,” Crawford later told media historian Albert Moran. In 1960, the postmaster-general directed that at least 40 per cent of commercial TV stations’ transmission time be Australian programs (soon increased to 45 per cent), including at least one hour per week between 7 and 9.30 pm (later increased to two hours), although the regulator did little to enforce the new rules.

Three years later, a Senate select committee investigated Australian TV productions. Crawford told it that the lack of good Australian television drama would “inevitably lead to an absence of self-knowledge which is the foundation of a country’s national pride.” Asked if he might have to rely a great deal more on Australian material in the future, Channel Nine’s Frank Packer (Kerry’s father, James’s grandfather) said, “You could be right, and probably the quality of programs will deteriorate, or you might be forced to reduce the number of hours you are on the air.”

The committee’s recommendations included a quota and subsidy scheme for TV drama. They were ignored by the Menzies government. After John Gorton became prime minister in early 1968, however, his Coalition administration established and funded several organisations to assist film and TV production and education. Then, after Whitlam’s election, a complex new points system for Australian content was introduced. It was strongly criticised by the industry, although it simply recognised current production levels, according to commercial TV historian Nick Herd. Two legislative attempts to clarify the broadcasting regulator’s powers were blocked in the Senate: Channel Nine executive Len Mauger said the proposed law would amount to “absolute
control” of commercial broadcasters by government.

As Australian television approached the end of its second decade, Crawford’s policy advocacy was having some success, though it was always partial and heavily contested. The more striking success of his company – a family business run with his sister Dorothy Crawford and her son Ian Crawford – was to show that Australians would watch Australian shows.

Bob Campbell, who went on to run the Seven Network and co-founded the production company Screentime, was working at Melbourne’s Channel 0 in the early 1970s. He says Crawford was “a skilled political practitioner but, even more so, a skilled deliverer of things that were commercially successful.” At the start, TV stations had been apprehensive about his campaign for locally made shows, especially TV stations run by newspaper groups. “But their apprehension turned as it quickly became clear that what Crawford had lobbied for, and was now delivering, was in their economic interest.”

Commercial stations bought more local drama. In 1965 and 1966, according to Nick Herd, each station devoted an annual average of twenty-nine hours to Australian drama. That grew to around 200 hours from 1966 to 1972 and 250 hours in 1973 and 1974.

Economics could bite as well as feed. Australia’s long postwar boom ended in 1973, when the international oil crisis and other factors drove up inflation and interest rates. Because its main source of revenue, advertising, is highly sensitive to overall economic activity, commercial television felt the 1974 recession quickly. The industry was also in the middle of a significant increase in its costs caused by the introduction of colour TV in 1975. Correctly anticipating that TV audiences with colour sets would lose interest in black-and-white broadcasts, stations started making and buying programs in colour before transmission started. Eventually, colour proved a boon to commercial TV revenues, accentuating its power and value as an advertising medium, but the extra costs of new equipment and more demanding production quality were felt first.

At the same time, Crawfords and its police shows were getting competition from new sources and cheaper types of programming. The sexy soap opera Number 96 started on the 0/Ten network in 1972. It was the top-rating program in both Sydney and Melbourne the following year. Number 96 was produced by a new independent company run by Don Cash and Bill Harmon. In 1974, another independent, the quiz and game show producer Reg Grundy, got a drama commission from the Seven Network, for a serial, The Class of 74. It was the fifth-top-rating program in Sydney in its first year. Crawfords showed they could join as well as beat the competition, by selling a raunchy soap of its own, The Box, to 0/Ten, also in 1974. Scheduled straight after Number 96, it rewarded 0/Ten by rating among the top five programs in Sydney and Melbourne.

Crawfords’ police shows were still strong but no longer dominant. From 1966 to 1970, Homicide episodes averaged a rating of 41 in Melbourne, according to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal’s 1980 Television in Australia: Its History Through the Ratings. That means 41 per cent of all homes with television – around two in every five – were tuned to the program. Peaks for individual episodes ranged between 47 and 52 each year. By the second half of 1974, the average was down to 25. Division 4 averaged 40 in its first year, 1969; in 1974, it averaged 24. Matlock Police had never reached the heights of the other two shows, but in 1974 it performed similarly in Melbourne: an average rating of 24.

Today, in a much more fragmented media environment, programs that achieved those 1974 figures would be huge successes (television now measures its audiences mainly in numbers of people rather than in percentages of available homes). But at the time they were not huge, and certainly not as stratospheric as they had been a few years before. There was also a failure of sorts – Ryan, commissioned by Seven in 1973, was not renewed for a second season.

Nine’s owner Frank Packer died in 1974. Perhaps he had been half-right. Australians might want to watch Australian shows some of the time, but after the initial “shock of recognition” they still loved their imports. Apart from Number 96, The Box and The Class of 74, the top shows in Sydney and Melbourne in 1974 included The Benny Hill Show and The Dick Emery Show, The Six Million Dollar Man and that old stalwart, Disneyland.

When Gerard Kennedy wanted to leave Division 4, there was a “big tussle” with Channel Nine, according to
Nigel Dick, who left Nine in 1972 and joined the board of Crawford Productions in 1974. That was the same year Frank Packer’s son Kerry took charge of the network. “They didn’t want to go on, and Hector, with the help of Len Mauger, finally got Kerry to agree to go on for thirteen episodes without Gerard Kennedy to allow Hector to prove the point that Gerard wasn’t absolutely vital.” Soon after, Gerard Kennedy appeared in another Crawfords show, The Box, on a rival network. “Kerry was furious,” says Dick. “How can you, Hector, allow Gerard Kennedy, who I made in my program, to appear in The Box?” So in January 1975, Packer cancelled Division 4.

About a month later, Labor’s national conference was held at Terrigal on the NSW Central Coast. Actors and others lobbied for tougher rules about Australian content on television. Media coverage of the conference was dominated by speculation about a relationship between deputy prime minister Jim Cairns and a member of his staff, Junie Morosi, and by poolside images of politicians and trade unionists that could have been outtakes from Number 96 and The Box.

The lobbying worked. Labor’s new policy platform required commercial television stations “to increase the percentage of Australian first release material with the ultimate objective of a level of at least 75 per cent.” It also contained other elements certain to inflame commercial media proprietors. Labor would “continue to investigate the social desirability and the technical feasibility of the rapid introduction of domestic satellite and cable broadcasting and television systems”; it would “initiate further study into the feasibility of fostering the establishment of a newspaper, independent of both government and existing private interests, conducted by those who produce it”; and it would “investigate all avenues with a view to eliminating any monopolistic and restrictive practices involved in existing relationships between film distributors and exhibitors.”

Before the year was out, before any of this could move from party aspiration to government action, Whitlam’s government lost office – first dismissed by governor-general Sir John Kerr, then defeated in an election. But before that happened Crawfords had lost its other two police shows. Matlock had only been renewed by 0/Ten for twenty-six episodes in 1975 (these days it is hard to get thirteen), Michael Pate left the show late in 1974 and rumours of its end were strong. According to the website Classic Australian TV, the network announced the cancellation in April, but the program got a brief reprieve when the Melbourne and Adelaide stations wanted to go on. Without the Sydney station’s money, though, it wasn’t possible. In July, the network announced that production would end in September, and it did, although stockpiled episodes continued on air into 1976.

Over at Homicide, Channel Seven cancelled eight scripts released for production in May 1975, according to script editor Paul Davies. In an article, “Killing Homicide,” for Metro magazine, he writes: “This was an unprecedented intrusion into a show’s executive independence… It was unheard of for Channel Seven to actually read a release draft of any Homicide script, let alone cancel eight in a row!” The show had been going for eleven years – “positively geriatric for any television series” – but Davies says it had kept reinventing itself through changes to the core cast and constant technological upgrading.

Channel Seven wanted “good, clean, plain old family-oriented detective work,” writes Davies, “where the principal cast – the ‘gang of four’ – were the major focus and the audience could never be allowed to get ahead of them by discovering what the crims were up to first.” What Homicide was delivering by the mid 1970s were episodes involving a vicious homophobic attack, abortion, mental illness, paedophilia, murders resulting from alcohol-fuelled aggression, and a corrupt government bureaucracy’s redevelopment of a street taken on by a group of residents that included communists. Davies says Hector Crawford’s 18 June 1975 all-staff memo announcing the replacement of the show’s producer effectively meant “running up the surrender flag.” Two months later, Seven dropped the axe.

“Is eleven years long enough for a series to be on air?” asks Davies. “Probably. Were there too many cop shows on Australian television at the time? Undoubtedly. Was there a cultural conspiracy to stifle local content by bringing down its principal flag-bearer? Who knows? Only one thing is certain: in mid 1975 there was a decision made to terminate Australia’s first really successful drama series at a moment when it had become a fascinating experiment in expressive filmmaking.”

If there is a smoking gun from Crawfords’ 1975 crisis somewhere, I haven’t found it. So does that mean there was no conspiracy?
If, by conspiracy, you mean that the bosses of three commercial TV networks got together in a room and agreed to cancel their Crawfords police shows, one by one, aiming to cut the pioneer of Australian TV drama down to size, I don’t think there was a conspiracy. The three shows, I think, were cancelled by their three networks primarily for reasons that were specific to each – what was happening with key cast members, what the shows were costing and would cost in the future, which programs advertisers wanted to be associated with, where fickle audiences were going at a time of great social change, and how program budgets could be best allocated across a limited number of shows to attract them.

But were those individual decisions taken in a charged political and industrial environment, at a time that meant they sent clear, collective signals to Crawfords, its competitors and the government about where real power in Australian television – and in Australia – lay? Absolutely. And were they taken by commercial TV operators who had come to like Australian drama but didn’t want governments forcing them to show it? Of course. By broadcasters who wanted competition among independent producers for good ideas and lower costs, and the tougher the better? Clearly. In an industry where Australian programs always had to prove themselves against high-budget overseas shows available to Australian broadcasters for a fraction of the cost of equivalent local programs? Certainly.

Crawfords’ titanic achievement was to show commercial networks they needed Australian drama and how to make it. Initially, that meant Crawfords itself was the maker. But over time, the networks didn’t need Crawfords quite as much as Crawfords needed them. Success on the scale achieved by Crawfords in the late 1960s and early 70s invites imitation, competition, escalating internal demands and complexity. The company managed some of that: 0/Ten kept buying *The Box* through the 1975 crisis; Nine commissioned *The Sullivans* the following year; Seven started *Cop Shop* in 1977.

Some of Crawfords’ key people went on to make some of the highlights of the next golden age of Australian drama, the mini-series boom of the late 1970s and 1980s. Crawfords was part of that, especially with *All the Rivers Run*, produced with HBO. The company also made other successful, long-running shows like *The Flying Doctors*.

But the era in which a new or repeat episode of a Crawfords show was screening in commercial prime time virtually every night of the week – that was gone. It ended in 1975, it ended quickly, and there was a lot else going on. I think there were three shooters and three shots, but it felt like a single weapon, jointly wielded.