Our animation studio, Ko Lik Films, has been employing around thirty people for the last six months, producing another series of the popular children's show Ooglies for CBBC. At this time, as far as I'm aware, we may be the only surviving animation studio in Scotland actively producing animation for UK broadcast. When we first started Ko Lik Films, the situation in Scotland felt far more positive, with more companies producing more content across the whole of Scotland.

From my personal perspective, the animation industry in Scotland probably peaked with the production of Academy-Award nominated animated feature, The Illusionist, produced here in Edinburgh by Bob Last. This was a production that attracted some of the best animators in the world to come and work here, putting Scotland on the international animation map. It should have been the catalyst for building something substantial, capitalising on the massive potential for further inward investment and highly skilled employment opportunities for the Scottish animation talent pool.

However, through a combination of systemic neglect and a complete absence of vision from public funders (including Scottish Enterprise, Creative Scotland and its predecessor Scottish Screen), that opportunity was squandered. I strongly believe that there are few, if any, countries across Europe with less support for animation than is the case today in Scotland. Casting a brief look over the awards made by Creative Scotland over the last year, there appears to be virtually no awards to animation productions. Anecdotally, I believe an award was made to one proposed production but that award has so far not been drawn down as, again to the best of my knowledge, the company has not, as yet, been able to close funding. I haven't scoured the Creative Scotland awards in any great detail, but apart from a handful of Artist Bursaries to individual animators, it appeared to me that the only substantial investment made in the animation sector in the last year or so has been funding the Norman MacLaren celebrations.

That award, covering various civic functions and celebrations of Norman MacLaren's work, struck me as particularly ironic, given that he was a man who left Scotland in the 1930s to go and spend virtually his entire working life in Canada, where he recognised there was far greater enthusiasm and support for his work. If he was a young animator in Scotland in the current climate, he'd have found nothing has changed. Indeed, if the money given over to these celebrations had been invested in some form of development work for young animators currently based in Scotland, rather than splendid dinners at Stirling Castle and other similar events, it would have struck me as a far more fitting and relevant investment. Particularly, given the parlous state of the Scottish animation sector at the moment.

One of the biggest issues that dogs animation in Scotland is the almost total lack of understanding, awareness or sensitivity on the part of public funders to the very different challenges and rewards that animation offers over other areas of film and television production. Be assured that Scotland has a very able and respected talent pool in this area. However, because of a chronic lack of investment and support in our sector, our
renowned animation talent seldom has the opportunity to work in Scotland and instead inevitably travels either south of the border or further afield in search of work.

Despite attracting substantial inward investment and creating long term employment opportunities for talented young Scots, animation remains scandalously undervalued by the likes of Creative Scotland and Scottish Enterprise. As a recent example, a few weeks ago I was advised that, unlike other Scottish based live-action film companies, as an animation company, we did not meet the criteria to be included under Creative Scotland's “Market Leaders” funding strand to receive support to attend international market events, despite our successful track record in working with international companies. This seems particularly short-sighted when, unlike other areas of the film industry where incoming productions provide a few weeks work at best, animation productions can employ crews over a much longer timeframe, often extending over a number of years. These high-value employment opportunities have a significant positive impact and contribution to local economies and communities that is far more extensive than incoming productions merely looking for suitable short-term shooting locations. Despite this, in the numerous consultations and reports that circulate regarding the Scottish film and television industry, the various agencies supposed to be active in the areas of media and culture at best appear to offer a casual recognition that animation is probably a good thing, and that perhaps Scotland should be producing a bit more. As far as I can see, these wooly platitudes are about as good as it gets for Scottish animation, in terms of insight, ambition, strategy or existing policy.

One other point that I never see mentioned in the numerous consultations, reports and inquests into Scottish film and television I've seen over the years: in every other European country, children grow up able to see a reflection of their own lives, their own culture, in animated form on a cinema screen. Except in Scotland. In the current climate, with the disgraceful marginalisation of Scottish animation, I cannot see even the remotest possibility of this generation of Scottish children, and perhaps not even the next generation, being able to share that experience. Why is that?

Clearly, there are massive problems facing the Scottish film and television sector and addressing these problems will be hugely challenging and take a good deal of time and restructuring on a wide scale. Ironically, perhaps in part due to the complete lack of awareness or support for our sector, the few Scottish animation companies who do manage to survive, such as our own company, have grown to be resilient and smart about managing our meagre resources. But that's about survival, not growth. That said, I don't want to paint an entirely negative picture of the Scottish animation sector because I believe that with the right form of properly informed intervention now, our industry can be made more sustainable and successful far more easily, within a far shorter timescale, than other parts of the film and television sector.

I believe the Scottish animation sector has the potential to take everything we have learned about managing in such a hostile climate, combine it with an internationally renowned indigenous talent pool, bolstered and inspired by other international talent very happy to come to work in Scotland. With only limited investment, if only to a level to bring our industry into line with almost any other European country, we can create real, meaningful and sustainable high-value employment opportunities. With that level of investment, we can build something far more ambitious and a credit to our country. But we need to be heard, and our industry recognised as having its own challenges and requirements to further develop and prosper.
Unlike most other European countries, we don't have a language barrier to overcome to get our work in front of international audiences. Alongside our animators and other technical crew, Scottish actors and voice talent are recognised as some of the most bankable names in the international film business. Looking at the broader picture, we have every justification in believing that our animation sector, instead of being the lowest achieving in Europe, should be right at the top of European animation production, with ambitions to ride a wave of existing goodwill and affection for Scottish culture in its widest sense that should see our work succeeding with audiences across the globe.

Cameron Fraser, Ko Lik Films Ltd

January 2015