

# Office of the Prime Minister

## Prime Minister

Minister for National Security and Intelligence  
Minister for Child Poverty Reduction  
Minister Responsible for Ministerial Services  
Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage



Terry Thomas

By email: [fyi-request-15789-d0e2eefd@requests.fyi.org.nz](mailto:fyi-request-15789-d0e2eefd@requests.fyi.org.nz)

Ref: PMO 2021-123

Dear Terry Thomas

## Official Information Act request relating to the 'They Are Us' movie

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request, received on 14 June 2021. You requested:

*“communications and briefings sent to and from you [the Prime Minister] and/or your office staff regarding the proposed film They Are Us sent, received or written in the time period up till 11 June 2021.”*

On Wednesday 9 June 2021 at 2:09 pm, the Deputy Chief Executive of Ministry for Culture and Heritage (MCH) made a phone call to the Private Secretary Arts, Culture and Heritage in this Office, notifying that MCH received advice from NZ Film Commission (NZFC) that a film relating to the March 15 attacks was being announced in the next 24-48 hours.

The following day on Thursday 10 June 2021 at 11:29 am, the Private Secretary Arts, Culture and Heritage made a phone call to NZFC requesting further information on the film. Following this phone call, this Office received an email from NZFC with the production's embargoed press release and background. I have decided to release this email chain to you with some information withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, *to protect the privacy of individuals*.

Also in scope of your request are text messages between members of staff in this Office, which I have made the decision to withhold in full under section 9(2)(g)(i) of the act, *to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinions by or between or to Ministers of the Crown or members of an organisation or officers and employees of any department or organisation in the course of their duty*.

There are no briefings which have been identified within the scope of your request. Accordingly, this part of your request is refused under section 18(e) of the Act on the basis *the document alleged to contain the information requested does not exist*.


The Prime Minister has stated publicly that she had no prior knowledge or involvement of the film and confirmed that she only became aware of it following a message just prior to the announcement. You may wish to refer to the following media articles where the Prime Minister has discussed this:

- <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/jacinda-ardern-says-christchurch-mosque-attacks-film-very-soon-and-raw>
- <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/christchurch-mosque-shootings-they-are-us-movie-jacinda-ardern-says-her-story-not-the-one-to-be-told/3LN3R44TZYYPKBIUTJKTKVCGYQ/>

In making my decision, I have considered the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Act.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Raj Nahna  
**Chief of Staff**

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**From:** s9(2)(a)  
**Sent:** Friday, 11 June 2021 4:59 pm  
**To:** ^Parliament: Ellen Read; s9(2)(a) Andrew Campbell  
**Subject:** RE: FYI: "They Are Us" feature film  
**Attachments:** They Are Us - Press Release (Embargoed Until 7am 11 June 2021 NZT).pdf; They Are Us - Backgrounder (Confidential).pdf

Thanks, Ellen. Have a good weekend.

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**From:** Ellen Read  
**Sent:** Friday, 11 June 2021 4:57 PM  
**To:** s9(2)(a); s9(2)(a)  
s9(2)(a) Andrew Campbell s9(2)(a)  
**Subject:** RE: FYI: "They Are Us" feature film

Hi again s9(2)(a)

Just fyi – this is the response we are sending to media queries:

A spokesperson for the Prime Minister said the Prime Minister and the Government have no involvement with the film.

**Ellen Read** | Deputy Chief Press Secretary  
Office of the Prime Minister  
s9(2)(a)  
Authorised by Rt. Hon Jacinda Ardern MP, Parliament Buildings, Wellington  
{SEEMAIL}

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**From:** Ellen Read  
**Sent:** Thursday, 10 June 2021 3:08 PM  
**To:** s9(2)(a) s9(2)(a)  
s9(2)(a) Andrew Campbell s9(2)(a)  
**Subject:** RE: FYI: "They Are Us" feature film

Thanks for this s9(2)(a)

**Ellen Read** | Deputy Chief Press Secretary  
Office of the Prime Minister  
s9(2)(a)  
Authorised by Rt. Hon Jacinda Ardern MP, Parliament Buildings, Wellington  
{SEEMAIL}

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**From:** s9(2)(a)  
**Date:** Thursday, 10 Jun 2021, 2:25 PM  
**To:** s9(2)(a) Ellen Read s9(2)(a) Andrew Campbell s9(2)(a)

**Subject:** FYI: "They Are Us" feature film

Kia ora Ellen, Andrew, s9(2)(a)

As per the heads up yesterday, please find attached a 'backgrounder' and embargoed PR in relation to the proposed feature film which has the PM as a central character.

As noted in the PR, the key creatives involved in this project are:

- Andrew Niccol (writer/director/producer, New Zealander)
- Philippa Campbell (producer, New Zealander)
- Stewart Till, CBE (producer, British)
- Ayman Jamal (producer, Saudi)
- Rose Byrne (actor, Australian)

Contact details for two of the producers are in the attached doc.

Also as I was informed yesterday, this project has (to date) been developed independently of any NZ Film Commission funding. However, NZFC advises that some of its staff—including the NZFC's former CEO, Annabelle Sheehan and Head of International Relations, Chris Payne—have been kept updated by the producing team. They further advise that the producing team is still determining their preferred approach to production financing; this will be shaped in part by the level of pre-sales and market interest the project garners following its launch at the Cannes Film Market (6-15 July 2021). The team has yet to decide and advise NZFC whether it will seek contestable NZFC Production Financing; they do intend to apply for the New Zealand Screen Production Grant (NZSPG), though whether this is the 40% grant (domestic) or the 20% grant (international) remains to be determined.

Please let me know if I can provide anything further on this.

Thanks,  
s9(2)(a)

s9(2)(a) | Private Secretary – Arts, Culture and Heritage  
s9(2)(a)

Office of Hon Carmel Sepuloni MP, Minister for Social Development & Employment, Minister for Disability Issues, Minister for ACC and Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage

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**From:** Mladen Ivancic [<mailto:mladen.ivancic@nzfilm.co.nz>]

**Sent:** Thursday, 10 June 2021 2:18 PM

**To:** Anna Butler <[Anna.Butler@mch.govt.nz](mailto:Anna.Butler@mch.govt.nz)>; s9(2)(a)

**Cc:** Chris Payne <[chris.payne@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:chris.payne@nzfilm.co.nz)>; Jasmin McSweeney <[jasmin.mcsweeney@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:jasmin.mcsweeney@nzfilm.co.nz)>

**Subject:** "They Are Us"

**Importance:** High

Hi Anna and s9(2)(a)

As per earlier conversations please find attached more details about the film project THEY ARE US.

Let us know if you have any follow up queries.

Regards

Mladen

**From:** Chris Payne <[chris.payne@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:chris.payne@nzfilm.co.nz)>  
**Sent:** Thursday, 10 June 2021 1:56 p.m.  
**To:** Mladen Ivancic <[mladen.ivancic@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:mladen.ivancic@nzfilm.co.nz)>  
**Cc:** Jasmin McSweeney <[jasmin.mcsweeney@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:jasmin.mcsweeney@nzfilm.co.nz)>; Leanne Saunders <[leanne.saunders@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:leanne.saunders@nzfilm.co.nz)>; Philippa Mossman <[philippa.mossman@nzfilm.co.nz](mailto:philippa.mossman@nzfilm.co.nz)>  
**Subject:** RE: Thanks "They Are Us"  
**Importance:** High

Hi Mladen

Please find **attached** finalised copies of the:

- production's embargoed press release; and
- backgrounder for MCH and PMO only.

Grateful if you could supply to Anna Butler and also to Kerry as discussed.

Jas and I will now engage with Philippa (Campbell) re: reactive messaging.

Thanks

CP



Chris Payne | Chief Operating Officer (Acting) & Head of International Relations  
New Zealand Film Commission | Te Tumu Whakaata Taonga  
Level 3, 119 Ghuznee St, Wellington 6011 | PO Box 11546, Manners Street, Wellington 6142  
s9(2)(a)  
[www.nzfilm.co.nz](http://www.nzfilm.co.nz) | [ondemand.nzfilm.co.nz](http://ondemand.nzfilm.co.nz)



Te Tumu Whakaata Taonga

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**THEY ARE US FEATURE FILM – BACKGROUNDER**

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This confidential document accompanies the embargoed press release for the *They Are Us* feature film project. The press release is embargoed until 7am Friday 11 June 2021 NZT. This document provides high level additional context on the project for MCH and the Prime Minister's Office and is not for wider distribution.

**Project Outline:**

*They Are Us* takes place during the week following the Christchurch attacks on New Zealand's Muslim community, and is an inspirational story about Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's response to the tragic events, and the remarkable achievements of her government and citizens who rallied behind her message of compassion and unity to ban assault rifles in New Zealand.

**Key People:**

Short biographies and links for each of the following are included at the end of this document.

- Andrew Niccol (writer/director/producer, New Zealander)
- Philippa Campbell (producer, New Zealander)
- Stewart Till, CBE (producer, British)
- Ayman Jamal (producer, Saudi)
- Rose Byrne (actor, Australian)

**Project Genesis:**

Ayman Jamal spent an extended period of time living and working in Wellington when his feature film, *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* was being post-produced at Park Road Post Production. Following the attacks in Christchurch, he developed the idea for the film and, as part of his research, met with the Imams of each of the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre Mosque, as well as many of the survivors and family members of the victims.

Jamal advises that, as a Muslim himself, the way in which Prime Minister Ardern responded to this act of terrorism is what drew him to develop the project. He notes that in the past 40 years he has not seen conflict handled in the way Prime Minister Ardern did: An approach that moved swiftly from conflict to unity, shared humanity and the coming together of community.

Jamal then approached producer Stewart Till to collaborate on the project's development. Till determined from the outset that it was essential for the project to be created out of New Zealand in partnership with experienced New Zealand filmmakers. Andrew Niccol was invited on to the project and has since written more than six drafts of the screenplay. His narrative approach is to track the key events over the week after the attacks (i.e. Friday to Friday), closely following the actions of Prime Minister Ardern. Niccol's screenplay reflects his intention to neither show the gunman's face or name him, nor detail his livestream or manifesto. Philippa Campbell has joined the producing team as the New Zealand-based producer.

**Key Themes:**

Heroism, Sacrifice, Humanity, Community, Leadership, Gun Control.

**New Zealand Government Support:**

*They Are Us* has been developed independently of NZFC development funding structures. However, NZFC staff—including the NZFC’s former CEO, Annabelle Sheehan and Head of International Relations, Chris Payne—have been kept updated by the producing team.

The producing team is still determining their preferred approach to production financing; this will be shaped in part by the level of pre-sales and market interest the project garners following its launch at the Cannes Film Market (6-15 July 2021). The team has yet to decide and advise NZFC whether it will seek contestable NZFC Production Financing; they do intend to apply for the New Zealand Screen Production Grant (NZSPG), though whether this is the 40% grant or the 20% grant remains to be decided.

**Production Contacts:**

Philippa Campbell and Stewart Till are happy to be contacted directly by New Zealand Government officials at any time should additional information be required:

Philippa Campbell (Auckland)  
s9(2)(a)

Stewart Till, CBE (Los Angeles)  
s9(2)(a)

**Key People – Biographies and Links:**

Andrew Niccol is a Los Angeles-based New Zealand screenwriter, producer, and director. His credits as writer, director and/or producer include *Gattaca* (1997), *S1m0ne* (2002), *Lord of War* (2005), *In Time* (2011), *The Host* (2013) and *Anon* (2018). He wrote and co-produced *The Truman Show* (1998), which earned him a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and won him the BAFTA Award in the same category.

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/andrew-niccol>  
<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0629272/>

Philippa Campbell is an Auckland-based producer whose credits include Dame Jane Campion’s acclaimed two-season TV mini-series *Top of the Lake* (2013 and 2017), winner of two Golden Globe Awards and an Emmy, among other accolades. Her feature films include Cannes selection *Rain* (2001), Sundance award winner *No. 2* (2005) and comedy horror hit *Black Sheep* (2006). As well as playing in A-list festivals, her films have been distributed in major international territories including the US. Philippa began her career in theatre as an actor and director and, prior to producing, worked in network television as script editor and writer of over 120 hours of drama across a range of genres.

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/philippa-campbell>  
<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0132788/>

**Stewart Till, CBE** is a Los Angeles-based British producer and executive with extensive experience across the film industry. Till's prior roles include serving as Chairman and Chief Executive of United International Pictures, Deputy Managing Director of British Sky Broadcasting's movie channels, President of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment's international distribution arm, President of Universal Pictures International (UPI), Chairman of Icon Productions UK and CEO of Sonar Entertainment. In 1999 he was appointed Vice Chairman of the UK Film Council (the predecessor to the current British Film Institute) and then in 2004 was appointed Chair.

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0863264/>

**Ayman Jamal** is the Dubai-based founder of and a producer at Barajoun Entertainment, a leading animation and visual effects studio in the MENA region. His dream to tell and share the stories of forgotten heroes from time immemorial led him to initiate the formation of Barajoun Entertainment back in 2013. His passion for storytelling inspired him to direct his first full animation feature film, *Bilal*, which tells a story about faith, hope and courage.

*Bilal* drew enormous applause and gained recognition and awards worldwide since its release in 2016. The film won "Best Inspiring Movie" on Animation Day during Cannes Film Festival in 2016 and was an official selection at the Annecy Film Festival in the same year. Bilal was also nominated for Best Animated Feature Film at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA), the region's highest accolade for film and was screened at the United Nations headquarters in New York in March 2017.

<https://www.barajoun.com/>

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm6336449/>

**Rose Byrne** is an Australian actress who made her screen debut in the film *Dallas Doll* (1994) and continued to act in Australian film and television throughout the 1990s. She obtained her first leading film role in *The Goddess of 1967* (2000), which brought her the Volpi Cup for Best Actress and made the transition to Hollywood in the small role of Dormé in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2002), followed by larger parts in *Troy* (2004), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), and *Knowing* (2009). Byrne appeared as Ellen Parsons in all 59 episodes of the legal thriller series *Damages* (2007–2012), which earned her two Golden Globe Awards nominations and two Primetime Emmy Award nominations. Recent credits include *Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway* (2021), *Mrs America* as Gloria Steinem (2020), *Irresistible* (2020) and *Like a Boss* (2020).

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0126284/>

10 June 2021

New Zealand Film Commission



## **PRESS RELEASE**

**STRICTLY EMBARGOED TO NZT 7.00 am FRIDAY 11 JUNE/PST 12.00 pm  
THURSDAY 10 JUNE 2021**

### **Andrew Niccol to Direct Rose Byrne as Jacinda Ardern in “They Are Us”, FilmNation and CAA Media Finance Group Launching Sales at Cannes Virtual Market**

New York, NY & Los Angeles, CA. June 10 2021 – Rose Byrne (Mrs. America, Bridesmaids) is set to play Jacinda Ardern in “They Are Us” written and to be directed by Andrew Niccol. FilmNation Entertainment will unveil the project to international buyers at the upcoming Cannes Virtual Market with CAA submitting to domestic and worldwide distributors.

The film, which takes place during the week following the Christchurch attacks on New Zealand’s Muslim community, is an inspirational story about the young leader’s response to the tragic events, and the remarkable achievements of her government and citizens who rallied behind her message of compassion and unity to ban assault rifles in New Zealand. “They are Us” comes from Ardern’s powerful speech describing the victims of the attack. The film is being produced by Ayman Jamal, Stewart Till, Niccol, and Philippa Campbell. Production will take place in New Zealand. The script was developed in consultation with several members of the mosques affected by the tragedy.

““They Are Us” is not so much about the attack but the response to the attack. How an unprecedented act of hate was overcome by an outpouring of love and support. The film addresses our common humanity which is why I think it will speak to people around the world. It is an example of how we should respond when there’s an attack on our fellow human beings,” said Andrew Niccol in a statement.

“We are thrilled to bring to market this inspiring true story about the positive impact, even in the darkest of moments, a strong leader can have on their constituents’ lives when they work from a place of compassion, love, and an unwavering conviction to do what is right,” said FilmNation CEO Glen Basner.

CAA Media Finance is co-representing domestic rights with FilmNation.

Both Niccol and Byrne are repped by CAA.

Released under the Official Information Act 1982