

# *Arts, Culture and Country*

by Josephine Caust



Even the most powerless  
have the ability to effect change  
through resistance

Discussion Paper

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Edited by Julian Meyrick,  
Harriet Parsons and  
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## Abstract

**T**he past two years have been a particularly dark time for the arts in Australia. Not only are we living through a pandemic, but the federal government has shown little interest in—or understanding of—the plight of the sector and its artists. The pandemic comes on the back of seven years of continuous erosion of public assistance to the arts at the national level, with more than ninety arts organisations defunded, while funding to individual artists has been significantly reduced. Many are struggling to survive in the face of repeated lockdowns and border closures to control the pandemic.

For years the arts sector has provided evidence of its economic benefits, as well as its intrinsic value to society. Yet politicians remain impervious to these arguments. Increasingly, it is ideology rather than evidence that determines government policy. In other words, support for the arts is not primarily a question of economics. It is a question of values.

The pandemic has made people realise the seminal importance of the arts and culture to our national well-being, but politicians do not see them as a central part of policymaking. Arts and culture are intertwined. We need to change how we view the relationship between the two within the political framework. This monograph presents some ideas on how to do it.

## About this Edition

THE NEW PLATFORM PAPERS is a series of long essays about current issues in arts and culture that affect the lives and work of creative practitioners in Australia. Two long essays will be commissioned each year and published in this format, as an early draft in pdf, for a public discussion at an event organised by Currency House. Copies can be downloaded from our website, [www.currencyhouse.org.au](http://www.currencyhouse.org.au). The essays will be published in their final version in paperback in December. A full list of the original series of Platform Papers quarterly essays from 2004 to 2021 can be found at the back of this essay.

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*This text was written on Kurna Land. The Author recognises the Kurna people as the custodians of the Adelaide Plains. She also recognises the indigenous custodians from other parts of Australia and overseas.*

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## About the author

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JOSEPHINE CAUST is a Principal Fellow (Hon) at the University of Melbourne. She has worked in the arts sector as a practitioner, manager, senior bureaucrat, academic and consultant and has published extensively on arts management and cultural policy. She is a regular contributor to *The Conversation* and the author of several books including *Arts Leadership in Contemporary Contexts* (Routledge 2018), *Arts and Cultural Leadership in Asia* (Routledge 2015) and *Arts Leadership: International Case Studies* (Tilde University Press 2013). *Governments and the Arts* will be published by Routledge later this year.

## My background

This year marks my fifty years of employment in the arts. Over that time I have been an actor, artistic director, administrator, program coordinator, policy adviser, academic lecturer, and researcher. And in the process I have also been witness to, and participated in, significant change across the sector.

My career began in 1972, straight after university, when I landed a job as a full-time actor at the South Australian Theatre Company. I was specifically employed for their festival production of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* directed by George Ogilvie. Of course, I didn't realise how lucky I was. There were only two female parts and around a dozen male. Later that year I went off to London to study acting and worked there in different theatre companies. The gender question, though, was always an issue and getting work as a female actor was much more challenging than for a male.

On returning to Australia in 1975 things were no better. I approached the (then) artistic director of the (now) State Theatre Company in Adelaide, George Ogilvie, for work. But the company was doing a season of all-male plays. (Odd, given that 1975 was the first United Nations International Year for Women.) So in 1976 I moved to Sydney, acquired an agent and worked as a freelance actor. By late 1978 I had returned to London and was becoming disenchanted with the life of a 'jobbing' actor. I decided the time had come for a change of profession.

I took a job as the coordinator of a community arts centre in the South of London. This was run as a collective, which in turn challenged my own contradictory notions around leadership. Later I was accepted into the postgraduate program in arts administration at the City University. Most of the lecturers were male, while the majority of students were female. This encouraged a fellow student, Susan Feldman, and myself to develop a seminar series for women guest lecturers in the arts. The series morphed into the first National Conference of Women Theatre Directors and

Administrators held in London in early 1980. A job as an administrator followed, with the 7:84 theatre company, founded by the Scottish writer, John McGrath. The name 7:84 and its repertoire, reflected the reality in the UK of the late 1970s, when 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the wealth. But while the company had strong sympathy for the working classes, it still had no women employed as directors or writers. I raised this with John. Like many left-wing men of the time, he saw no conflict.

So in 1981 I accepted a job in Sydney as Director, Women and Arts. This was a consultancy position in the Premier's Department of the New South Wales State Government under Neville Wran. The position involved organising a state-wide Women and Arts Festival and coordinating a National Research Project (NRP). It was important to organise the festival in a way that would involve as many different voices as possible, so we had 12 advisory groups across different art forms and sectional interests. The NRP was funded by the Australia Council and written by Gillian Appleton who reported to an Advisory Committee of senior women in the field. This research provided the first detailed data on women in the arts in Australia and was published in early 1983.

From there, I became a senior project officer on the Australia Council's Theatre Board, responsible for drama policy and funding nationally. It was now 1983: the Council was starting to be squeezed financially by the Federal Government and more and more companies were competing for grants. So the Board sought a new solution to its burgeoning expenditure: a 'ceiling' on funding that would limit the maximum amount of annual grant money awarded by the Australia Council to \$300,000 per company.

The plan was not received well. At least half a dozen companies were already receiving much more than that. It became my role to communicate the new policy to the affected companies, and they in turn lobbied the incoming Labor government under the leadership of Bob Hawke. Their actions and Hawke's compliant response

made me realise how political the relationship between government and the arts can be.

After working for different arts companies in Melbourne and Sydney as well as the Victorian College of the Arts, I accepted the position of Director of Arts at the South Australian Arts Department. Economic rationalism was starting to have an impact on Australia and although we tried to resist it, the assessment of arts activities based on numbers was already entrenched.

In 1995 I returned to consultancy work. I worked with Asialink, for which I created the first residency scheme for Australian theatre artists across Asia, and another for arts managers. I also undertook a consultancy with the University of Melbourne to design their new arts management program. In 1997 I joined the University of South Australia to direct their arts management program; completed a PhD in arts leadership and started the *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management*. However, my place in the academic world also succumbed to corporatisation when my Pro Vice Chancellor suggested that arts programs were no longer economically viable.

Since 2011, I have been affiliated with the University of Melbourne as a Principal Fellow (Honorary) in the School of Culture and Communications. I have published widely on the sector and arts leadership; and my book *Governments and the Arts* will be published by Routledge this year. In what follows, I draw on all aspects of my professional experience to reflect on Australia's cultural policy history, and make some proposals for the future. It is a narrative which is less well-known than it should be and deserves to be interrogated.

## The reality of our times

When we think about Australia's art and culture, we must start with the First Nations peoples who for thousands of years have cared for the land on which modern Australia has 'settled'. For the First Nations people of Australia art, culture, identity and country are intertwined and interdependent.<sup>1</sup> Their wisdom and knowledge are a gift to us all and provide a template for understanding the interrelationship between art, culture and our world. We need to recognise this gift as a nation by respecting our arts, culture and country, and seeing them as *one*. Caring for country, caring for culture and caring for the arts are interconnected.

The wanton destruction of priceless Aboriginal Cultural Heritage at Juukan Gorge in 2020 by the mining company Rio Tinto, shows how far we are from achieving this holistic understanding.<sup>2</sup> Traditional arts practices and languages are being lost every day through our neglect, greed or inattention. To protect the cultural principles and aesthetic values we cherish, they must be reflected in the policy practices of government. To start the process of change we need to isolate the values and beliefs that have brought us to our current position, so that we can consider how to address them.

## The arts and the pandemic

At the height of the pandemic in Australia in 2020, the Coalition government's large-scale financial intervention to prevent economic collapse and protect the community from suffering was a revelation. Yet, while some sectors, such as aviation and construction, received special treatment, others were pointedly left out.<sup>3</sup> One of these was the arts. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census, in 2016 over 350,000 people were employed in the broader cultural sector. Alison Pennington and Ben Eltham believe that this is an underestimate. They argued in 2021 in their

report for the Australia Institute, *Creativity in Crisis*, that it does not include the large number of artists employed in related businesses. In 2018, the Federal Government itself calculated that the cultural and creative industries contribute A\$111.7 billion to the Australian economy, or a 6.4% of GDP, and employ over 600,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

In mid-March 2020, nearly all arts activity stopped. Theatres, galleries, arts centres, concert halls, cinemas and festivals had to close. Film production ceased. Rehearsals were cut short, and planned exhibitions were cancelled or put on-line. A website ‘I Lost My Gig’ was set up to track performing artists’ loss of income. By the end of April, more than \$340 million had vanished from the sector.<sup>5</sup> This was a scenario that could not have been foreseen by artists, most of whom were already making a precarious living.<sup>6</sup> Few had savings to fall back on.

The Federal Government had pledged \$27 million to support the sector: \$7 million for Indigenous visual arts organisations, \$10 million for regional artists and \$10 million for the mental health service, *Support Act*.<sup>7</sup> The federal Arts Minister, Paul Fletcher, declared in Parliament that he believed that most artists and arts workers were either on JobKeeper—the government scheme that allowed employers to keep paying wages while business was restricted—or JobSeeker—a temporary unemployment benefit at an increased rate.<sup>8</sup> However, while some arts workers were able to access JobKeeper many were not eligible because they were casuals or on short-term contracts.<sup>9</sup>

On 19 March, Opera Australia had stood down its singers and its orchestra without pay.<sup>10</sup> A week later, after wide public protest, it granted them half pay and long service leave until May 2020. Meanwhile, a core administrative group of 35 staff, including all the company’s senior executives, continued full-time, albeit on reduced salaries.<sup>11</sup> In early April, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra’s (MSO) musicians had also been stood down.<sup>12</sup> These actions by two major performing arts companies demonstrate the paradox that while artists were seen as ‘non-essential workers’, management were ‘essential’ to the modern cultural organisation.

MSO orchestra members were eventually deemed eligible for JobKeeper. But their treatment by MSO management remains troubling.<sup>13</sup> Not only were artists disrespected in the broader community, they were being treated within their own cultural organisations as discretionary labour. For those applying for the unemployment benefit, JobSeeker, professions, like ‘playwright’ and ‘visual artist’, were simply not recognised as employment categories by Centrelink. Hence even getting JobSeeker was a difficult process for many arts workers.

Pennington and Eltham estimate that 53 per cent of arts businesses closed after the first 2020 lockdowns.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, they also observe that participation by the broader community in the arts increased, with two thirds of Australians seeking out arts activities as an outcome of the pandemic-related lockdowns.<sup>15</sup>

Another report for the Australia Institute, published by Bill Browne in May 2021, notes that if the federal government had put \$2 billion subsidy into the arts and entertainment sector, as it did for the construction industry in 2020–21, it would have created 8,593 jobs.<sup>16</sup> This would have equated to *twice* as many jobs for men and *ten times* the number of jobs for women. (Women represent only 12 per cent of the workforce in construction, while in arts and entertainment the gender balance is 49 per cent men and 51 per cent women).

Over the first months of the pandemic, it became clear that despite the government’s assertion that the critical factors determining its pandemic policy were economic, industries that employed fewer people than the cultural and creative industries were receiving far more generous financial support.<sup>17</sup> Any sector framed as ‘private’ could be assisted. Any sector framed as ‘public’ was likely to be ignored. Thus, private education providers received JobKeeper but public universities—the larger contributor to the economy and attended by many more students—did not.<sup>18</sup>

In early 2020, the ABS revealed that ‘arts and recreation’ was the sector hardest hit by the closures in Australia: with 94 per cent affected.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the Grattan Research Institute estimated that while up to 26 per cent of Australian workers were likely to lose their jobs due to shutdowns and restrictions, in the creative

and performing arts this figure was a whopping 75 per cent.<sup>20</sup> Yet Coalition politicians continued to portray the arts as a 'lifestyle' choice and not real employment.<sup>21</sup> This was the harsh reality of 2020: arts organisations suffered their greatest income loss of the past 50 years because of closures and necessary measures put into place to control the pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

For months the Federal Government failed to address the impact the closures were having on the arts. For many this only proved that, however they were framed, at a policy level, the Government neither valued nor understood the sector. It wasn't until late June 2020, and after extensive industry lobbying, that the Government finally announced direct support for the sector. The main package, RISE, provided an initial fund of \$75 million,<sup>23</sup> increased by another \$125 million in March 2021. However, applications for the fund did not open until September 2020, and the first approved grants did not arrive until November. There were eight months in 2020 when large parts of the arts sector received no federal support whatsoever to re-start or plan for activities in 2021. The process also showed a lack of transparency and also allowed room for inappropriate political interference.<sup>24</sup> Like George Brandis's National Programme for Excellence in the Arts<sup>25</sup> and Mitch Fifield's Catalyst Scheme before it,<sup>26</sup> the minister made the final decisions on the RISE package arts funding, after receiving internal recommendations by government bureaucrats. Direct knowledge or experience of the arts does not seem to have been as important to this process as political priorities.

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The impact of the pandemic on the Australian arts sector will be felt for years to come. While arts activities have re-started in most cities, the waves of Covid cases have created a climate of chronic uncertainty. The most significant impact has been on Melbourne, which experienced lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 totalling 262 days. The Rising Arts Festival in Melbourne was cancelled in June 2021 after its opening night. Melbourne's individual artists, the most disadvantaged by Covid, have received little additional support from the Federal Government through 2020 and

2021. State governments have generally been more responsive to the needs of their arts sectors, offering a range of emergency relief within weeks of the initial wave of closures. However, this support has been uneven and lacking a ‘whole of sector’ approach.<sup>27</sup>

Above all, the pandemic has highlighted the *political* priorities of both federal and state governments. Major sporting events have been supported and allowed to continue, while arts events have been cancelled, sometimes at the last minute. Football teams have been allowed to circumvent lockdowns and interstate border closures by staying in ‘bubbles’ but artists have rarely been given the same opportunities. The 2020 Byron Bay Music Festival was cancelled before it even opened while only a few kilometres away neighbouring sports events continued. This all points to government preferences for supporting certain activities on grounds very different from economic ones.

## Australia is a wealthy nation?

The population of Australia has grown dramatically and in fact nearly doubled since the 1970s (13.8 to 25.4 million).<sup>28</sup> So has our GDP, with major economic growth during the mining boom of the 1980s. Even so, government funding for the arts has been continually resisted, particularly at the political level, despite widespread support from the general community.<sup>29</sup> Instead of valuing and celebrating our artists as the embodiment of our ‘national wealth’ they have come to be treated as members of the ‘deserving poor’. Between 2008–2018, the federal government actually *reduced* its overall funding for arts and culture by 18.9 per cent.<sup>30</sup> By 2018 too, the federal government’s proportion of national cultural spending at all levels had fallen from 45 to 39 per cent. In 2015, Australia’s contribution to culture was around .77 per cent of GDP while the average of other OECD countries was 1.11 per cent of GDP.<sup>31</sup> Despite its wealth, Australia spends less on culture than comparable nations and in 2017 was ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 33 OECD countries for its cultural expenditure.<sup>32</sup>

Australia’s demography has also been transformed by waves of immigration from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. Our culture is not homogenous and there are as many arts practices as there are cultures from which they spring. While arts funding has been steadily decreasing, the amount of cultural activity at a community level has been increasing and become more diverse. Yet, despite the many arts activities that occur in outer suburban and regional areas, the largest proportion of arts funding goes to the ‘European high arts’ concentrated in the inner cities, so that the distribution of funding is skewed geographically, and across these practices and cultures. In the real world there is neither a hierarchy of cultures, nor a hierarchy of arts practices. All citizens should have access to, and be able to participate in, the arts practices of their culture.<sup>33</sup>

Given the diversity of our culture, can we create a consistent policy that embraces all forms of cultural expression, accepts their differences and celebrates them? Australia is the only Western democracy that does not have a bill or charter of rights

for its citizens, nor does it have any human rights legislation embedded in its constitution.<sup>34</sup> Could a charter of cultural rights ensure more equitable support for different arts practices and allow us to move from a European traditionalist approach, to one that is more inclusive?<sup>35</sup>

We also know that having a regular income—a roof over our heads, food to eat—enables a normal life and therefore *a means of contributing to society in a meaningful way*. The pandemic has seen a universal basic income (UBI) being seriously considered and implemented in other countries.<sup>36</sup> As a wealthy country, Australia could certainly afford to consider a scheme of this kind too.

Kate Raworth's Doughnut Theory of economic growth directs productivity back into the redistribution and regeneration of resources.<sup>37</sup> The continuous cycle of sustainable growth she proposes curtails the trend that limits rewards to an ever decreasing few. Could Australia embrace this model and see arts and cultural production as a central part of a sustainable economic and social cycle?

In 1962, Donald Horne dubbed Australia 'the lucky country'. He thought he was being ironic. But we can say we are 'lucky' because our country is wealthy. If we measure median wealth per adult, Australia comes out on top internationally. In terms of mean wealth, we are fourth overall.<sup>38</sup> Certainly some Australians are very wealthy. But Australia's wealth is not evenly distributed, and 13.6 per cent of the population or 3.24 million people live below the poverty line.<sup>39</sup> What is more, the poverty rate in Australia is worse than in many other wealthy countries and the imbalance between those who have and those who have not, has only grown over the years.<sup>40</sup>

The contradictions are immense. We lionise First Nations' artists while their communities live in poverty. Their treatment is a matter of national shame. The official response to refugees fleeing oppression betrays a streak of xenophobia. Their plight has been exacerbated by the effects of climate change, yet in 2020, at a time when the world is trying to divest itself of its dependence upon fossil fuels, the Australian Government has provided \$10.3 billion to the fossil fuel industry.<sup>41</sup>

Australia is out of step with the times. We need to learn to distinguish between profit and wealth and see our society—and the environment around it—as an integrated system in which everything is connected to everything else. When the interdependence of community and country is acknowledged, culture is naturally located at the centre of our collective lives. Wealth is reflected in all that we cherish, not our bank balances. Caring for culture and country are interconnected. We have a role model in the example of our First Nation’s Peoples that would allow us to cherish our real wealth—our country and our culture—but we need to ensure that these are embedded in our legislative framework and located at the centre of policymaking. When culture is cherished, so are arts practices. We are in many ways a ‘lucky country’ but not in the way it is often understood.

Making a career as a professional artist is not easy. It requires enormous self-belief and resilience to overcome the challenges, obstacles and knocks that occur along the way. The economist David Throsby and his colleagues have recorded for many years the depressingly low income Australian artists earn. In their latest study, in 2017, they noted that the average annual income from creative work was \$18,800; and overall, the average income for artists from all sources of employment was just \$48,400—21 per cent below the workforce average.<sup>42</sup>

Professional artists are people who do their creative work because it is central to their being. Their work is a gift to the broader community. Yet they are not treated as equals in our society. Why can’t artists have access to all the normal social and economic benefits, without being slighted and demeaned? Why shouldn’t they be able to access unemployment benefits, as the rest of the workforce does, while searching for work in the professions for which they are qualified: as musicians, actors, artists and writers? Why can’t we institute fellowships for mid-career and senior artists that enable them to continue their work with dignity and respect? Treating the arts community thus, requires a shift in our mind set. It is in society’s interest to acknowledge and respect our cultures and arts practices. It is part of who we are and connects us to our country. It is the real wealth of the nation.

## Funding the arts: historical reflections

For the past thirty years, policy makers have framed the arts within an industry paradigm and made arguments to government based on their economic value. The shift to an industry model began in 1985 under Bob Hawke's Labor government, following the recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Expenditure's Inquiry into Commonwealth Assistance to the Arts, chaired by Leo McLeay. The committee's report (the McLeay report) *Patronage, Power and the Muse*, was published in 1986.<sup>43</sup> But there were several important policy events leading up to this moment.

Before the mid-1980s funding for the arts was justified as a 'public good'.<sup>44</sup> According to this view, the arts were fundamental to a healthy society that should be made available to all. This was the point of view adopted by the British economist John Maynard Keynes, a powerful influence on the development of arts policy in the United Kingdom after World War II.<sup>45</sup> Keynes also argued that deliberations about arts funding should be conducted at 'arm's length' from ministers and the government of the day, so that decisions could not be influenced by party politics. This principle underpinned the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946 and the Canada Council in 1957.

The Australian economist and senior public servant, Herbert 'Nugget' Coombs, who studied in Britain under Keynes, was influenced by his approach. Through the 1960s, as Governor of the Reserve Bank in Australia, he worked hard to get bipartisan support for a similar model of arts funding here. Australia was relatively late in supporting the arts via a statutory authority but, by the late 1960s, both sides of politics had come to favour this model. The Australia Council for the Arts was not legally recognised as a statutory body until the Australia Council Act of 1975, but its mission had become evident in 1973, when it began absorbing various existing bodies, and by 1974 it was effectively operational. In establishing the Council, Prime Minister

Gough Whitlam proclaimed: 'In any civilised community the arts and associated amenities must occupy a central place'.<sup>46</sup>

In its first iteration, the Council comprised seven art form boards whose government-appointed members were drawn from well-respected peers in each artistic field. This was seen as vital for the policies and programs of the Council to be respected and seen as appropriate by artists themselves.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, Aboriginal Arts were recognised as a distinct art form with its own board. The Council's mandate was to develop and support the arts across the nation, as an essential facet of the development of a national culture. Hardly had it been established, however, when, to borrow a metaphor favoured by Ben Eltham, the goalposts started to move.<sup>48</sup>

## Changing the model

In 1976 the Industries Assistance Commission (today's Productivity Commission) commenced its Inquiry into Assistance to the Performing Arts (the IAC Inquiry). It recommended that funding for the major performing arts bodies be phased out over several years and the main part of the sector operate on commercial industry terms.<sup>49</sup> The new Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, rejected the report and reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the ongoing subsidy of all forms of arts practice, including that of the major performing arts organisations. During Fraser's term of office, however, financial support for the Australia Council, its Chair and CEO Timothy Pascoe observed, decreased, leading to a 20 per cent drop in overall funding and a 35 per cent reduction in staffing.<sup>50</sup>

In 1984, following a change of government, an event occurred that fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between the Australia Council and the Government. The new Labor Prime Minister Hawke was lobbied by the major performing arts organisations to block policy changes being proposed by the Council's Theatre and Music Boards. The aim of these changes had been to limit the share of Council funding going to any one arts organisation. They were a means of

redistributing a limited funding pool and meeting increasing demand from new artists in the field.<sup>51</sup> While he did not overrule the Boards, Hawke committed an additional \$802,000 to the Council's annual allocation, earmarked for the large performing arts organisations. This direct political action scuttled the arms-length relationship between the Council and the government. It weakened the authority of the Council by making it clear that major arts organisations could lobby ministers directly if they did not like a particular funding decision. The disproportionate funding ratio between the major performing arts companies and other forms of arts practice and organisations remains an issue to this day. The major companies continue to receive the lion's share of the Council's funding pie, a share that its falling annual allocations have only increased.<sup>52</sup>

By the late 1980s, the ideology of economic rationalism (neoliberalism) had become the policy mantra of the Hawke Government.<sup>53</sup> This mandated that all government policy was to be seen primarily in economic terms, that public bodies should be privatised where possible, and all activity measured in terms of 'productivity' and 'efficiency'. This conflicted with Keynes' notion of the 'public good', and had an immediate and long-term impact on the arts. It led to the characterisation of the arts as an 'industry' and attempted to measure them by industry standards. Fraser had rejected the recommendations of the IAC inquiry in 1976, now ten years later the Hawke Government was embracing all its implications.<sup>54</sup> The McLeay report had explicitly framed the arts in industry terms and many artists and arts workers resisted the change; but the shift to economic rationalism proved relentless.<sup>55</sup>

This shift only intensified under Prime Minister Keating, despite his prescient observation that 'no economic or social decision is without a cultural consequence'.<sup>56</sup> In 1994 Keating took economic rationalism further with the publication of Australia's first national cultural policy, *Creative Nation*. This document argued eloquently for the importance of culture in everyone's life, but revealingly the term 'arts' played a minor role in its narrative. Instead, the concept of the 'creative industries' began to emerge.

It could be argued that the Labor Party pursued the industry model as a way of mainstreaming the arts sector, and framing the artist as a legitimate worker, wrongly under-resourced and undervalued. But the downside was that the arts were now required to organise as corporate entities and be growth- and profit-driven.

Policymakers and bureaucrats embraced the industry framing as one they could understand. There was no longer a need to worry about the tricky problem of evaluation as the arts were now measured by inputs and outputs. Success meant how many people went to see a theatre production or bought a CD or a book, or how many people a company employed. This emphasis on all forms of numerical assessment provided a solid base for economic argument and demonstrated the income earning potential of various forms of arts practice.

The birth of the creative industries model led to further opportunities beyond the arts. The ABS currently defines the sector as including design, fashion, broadcasting, electronic and digital media, film, libraries and archives, literature and print media, heritage, performing arts, visual arts and crafts, music composition and publishing, as well as other cultural goods and sales.<sup>57</sup> In terms of income generation, the arts are a minor player in this definition (although they often have a greater rhetorical presence in the policy domain). In the creative industry model, the practice of art is cast as a commercial activity at heart that generates growth and profit for its producers. The corollary is that in the long term it should no longer rely on government support.

Many people involved in the newly-defined creative industries began to describe themselves as 'creatives'. The terms 'artist', 'arts worker', 'director', 'curator', 'producer', 'arts administrator' or 'arts manager' were gradually replaced by one generic term. But what does the title 'creative' actually mean? Implicitly, it means the individual has a connection with the 'creative industries', but beyond this, it is hard to say. The term is non-specific and could equally refer to a scientist, a road planner, or an engineer. Many professions require a degree of creative skill, and so could also be described as 'creative'. Is this a problem? Yes and no. It may be a term recognised

within the cultural sector, but it is less so outside of it. It is also limiting in that it does not convey the actual work that a creative person does. Perhaps it is a useful way of describing people who work in the media area, where individuals use ‘creative’ thinking to solve industrial problems. Whether we would describe them as artists is up for debate.

The disappearance of the terms ‘artists’ and the ‘arts’ is deeply troubling. Both have fallen out of favour and become ones of casual dismissal, even abuse. Being ‘a creative’ is hip. Being ‘an artist’ is pretentious. Saying that you work in the ‘arts’ can then be seen as elitist and old fashioned and a sign that you are out of touch: no longer part of the technical, post-modern world in which today’s Australians live. Governments have consciously or unconsciously encouraged this negative perception, by facilitating the demise of these important words, and the history they carry with them.

## **Business entities**

A new entity was established under Paul Keating in 1994, modelled on the US National Endowment for the Humanities. The Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities was located in Melbourne. Its mission was to address the broader issues in Australia’s history and cultural heritage. However, it had hardly begun operating when John Howard’s Coalition was elected in 1996.

The election was a landslide victory that few expected, and put an end to the cultural agenda that Keating’s government had initiated. In 1999 the Foundation for Culture and the Humanities morphed into the Australian Business Arts Foundation (ABAF). Its mission was repurposed to raise private sector support for the arts. Over time its name changed once more. It is now called Creative Partnerships Australia (CPA), but its mandate remains essentially the same: ‘to find private sector support for the arts through partnerships, one-off and on-going sponsorships, and philanthropic engagement’.<sup>58</sup> The establishment of the ABAF/CPA signalled that

direct funding for the arts was now seen as a non-preferred approach by Coalition governments. Instead, the US model of private sector sponsorship was the way forward.

An important action of the Howard Government was the establishment of the Major Performing Arts Organisations Board (MAPAB) as an outcome of the Nugent Inquiry into the Major Performing Arts (the Nugent Inquiry) in 1999.<sup>59</sup> This fenced-off support for the larger performing arts organisations from their smaller, peer companies, so that they could be assessed on business rather than artistic criteria. It was no longer possible, as in 1984, for the Council to pursue equality of funding for all cultural organisations. MAPAB funding would be guaranteed by multi-year contracts. The companies just had to be solvent to be eligible to receive it. In the event, they did not even have to meet that criterion, as the Sydney Dance Company was rescued financially in early 2007 and a number of State opera companies also continued to trade while insolvent in 2016–18.<sup>60</sup>

The Coalition remained in power until 2007 and saw everything as a business. Its managerialist perspective implied that if cultural organisations operated properly ‘as businesses’, they would not need much government support. The concept of a sector in which arts companies were big or small corporations took hold. This meant embracing the language of business plans, performance indicators and strategic development. Perhaps it was imagined that direct federal funding would eventually cease altogether, save for a few favoured groups based on western cultural heritage norms that were essential to the national identity: a national gallery, a national museum, a national library, a national opera company, a national ballet company and a national theatre company. Other forms of arts practice would either become self-sufficient or would be supported only by State or local governments. The ratio between earned income and subsidy changed inexorably during this period, particularly for the major performing arts companies. From a revenue mix of around 80 per cent subsidy to 20 per cent earned income, the percentages reversed.<sup>61</sup> This

inevitably meant that these organisations had to prioritise earning box office income over making art and taking risks.

Accompanying this financial change was a new determination that the boards of arts companies should be populated by people from the business sector who knew how the ‘real world’ worked, and could teach artists how to function sensibly as ‘businesspeople’. These board members did not need to know anything about the arts. In fact, it was considered an advantage if they did not, as they were less likely to be ‘captured’ by artists. They would work at generating private sources of income while ‘objectively’ reducing activities they judged to be too indulgent, expensive, high risk or low-productive. The larger the arts company, the more the board members needed to be drawn from the corporate world. The organisation could then be seen as a serious business entity. Bizarrely, board members with backgrounds in the arts, were regarded by the funders as ‘unskilled’. Only those from outside the sector, were seen as ‘skilled’.

The shift towards a corporate model of governance was encouraged by arts funding agencies like the Australia Council. In 2004 the Australia Council produced a publication with a recommended composition for an ideal arts board that emphasised the need for board members to understand business paradigms.<sup>62</sup> Board members with corporate backgrounds were seen as having greater potential to raise money from the private sector—reflecting the US tradition in which sitting on an arts board is conditional on bringing in philanthropic support.<sup>63</sup> Hence sponsorship from tobacco companies could be embraced (in the past) and mining companies (today). From the corporatist perspective, the source of sponsorship was not regarded as problematic.<sup>64</sup> Even if it did not align with the mission of an arts organisation, artists were expected to be ‘grateful’ for the largesse bestowed upon them and not query its source.<sup>65</sup>

Such a logic created serious challenges for arts boards, and the leaders and staff of arts companies. Certainly, it could be helpful to have a board member who provided legal advice, but if, as was often the case, almost every board position was

occupied by a person with a non-arts background, there would be no deep knowledge at a board level of arts practice, of how to work with artists or how an arts organisation best functioned.

The focus of any board member is, naturally, on what they know and what they have learnt from their own professional training and industry. How does this corporate knowledge bear on the problems and processes of making art? What do such board members know about taking artistic risks, about what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ work and how to manage (and value) artistic sensibilities?

Other sectors, whether they are mining, banking, car manufacturing or chocolate making, have boards composed of experts in their field to oversee their activities. The board members have an intimate understanding of its professional norms, values and practices, and know how to work successfully with them, and within them. Why not the arts? Why are arts boards so dominated by people who know little about the arts, and come from completely different sectors? Why too is that seen as a good thing by governments? Why is arts governance treated in this way? It seems that many, on both sides of politics, believe artists cannot be trusted to govern themselves.

The corporatisation of arts boards, and of arts leadership more broadly, has caused considerable harm to the sector.<sup>66</sup> There have been several egregious examples of boards who have not understood the expectations or the needs of their organisation, as well as managers from the corporate world who have shown little sympathy or understanding of their artists or for the nature of their institution.<sup>67</sup> During the pandemic there was the example of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, ‘letting go’ its artists while protecting its managers; and many arts organisations, such as festivals, offered no compensation to artists when they cancelled their contracts.<sup>68</sup>

In 2018, after Circus Oz suffered a dramatic reduction in its earned income but was *not* insolvent, it was put ‘on fair notice’ by the MAPAB.<sup>69</sup> After a review commissioned by the Australia Council and Creative Victoria, MAPAB recommended to the Circus Oz Board in 2021 that it remove the last of its remaining artists and embrace a completely ‘skills based’ membership (that is non-arts

members). Instead of recognising that the company was lacking *artistic* leadership and this had dramatically affected its mission and hence its revenue earnings, the recommendation was to *increase the corporatisation of the board*.<sup>70</sup> How would new *corporate* members renew the *artistic* vision of Circus Oz when the existing members had failed to grasp its importance? Circus Oz is unique in having a core membership of former staff and performers of the circus. These members elected four board members out of a total of 11. The solution to a lack of artistic directorship was to remove these members and replace them with more corporate delegates, even though they were already the majority. The membership refused to agree to this demand, so the board summarily decided to close the company. When the membership resisted this move, the board resigned and, in early 2022, they took back ownership of the company and created a new board.<sup>71</sup>

Isn't it obvious that an arts organisation must be driven by its arts practice, not by generic business paradigms? Unless knowledge of arts practice is placed at the centre of an arts organisation, the entity is merely an empty shell. It is time that arts governance was made 'fit for purpose'. The values and objectives of the corporate sector are completely at odds with the arts and their model cannot be simply flipped over and applied.

## A cultural policy?

Federal Labor, led by Kevin Rudd, was elected to power in 2007. The new energy he brought to government raised hopes that the many gaps that existed in planning for the nation's future were going to be addressed. In the arts, two readily-perceived priorities were the development of a national cultural policy and adequate, equitable funding. Prior to the election there had been a national campaign to develop a cultural policy for the nation.<sup>72</sup> In April 2008 Rudd convened an 'Australia Summit' in Canberra to develop future strategies across a range of policy domains.<sup>73</sup> There were ten streams, with 100 delegates in each. One focussed on arts and culture: 'Creative

Australia—the arts, film and design.’ A lot of positive energy was created around the Summit, fuelling a belief that Labor would steam ahead to change the broader policy environment. The National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 was a signifier of this intellectual (and emotional) opening up.<sup>74</sup>

There was excitement too when Peter Garrett, a rock musician, was appointed the new Minister for the Arts. For a while it seemed that the arts sector was at last rising in the Government’s estimation. However, Garrett appeared more drawn to his other portfolio of responsibility, the environment. Labor became enmeshed in internal leadership struggles and policy conflicts between right and left factions, and the issues around culture and the arts receded as a priority. In 2010, Julia Gillard replaced Rudd as Prime Minister and Simon Crean replaced Garrett as Minister for the Arts. Crean was a more experienced politician than Garrett, but he still had difficulty convincing his colleagues to support a cultural policy.

Finally, in March 2013, five years after the Australia Summit, a new national cultural policy surfaced. *Creative Australia* included recommendations for significant increases in the Australia Council’s annual allocation, as well as changes to its relationship with the Federal Government.<sup>75</sup> There was a revival of optimism in the arts community that more generous support would provide a stronger base for the sector; but straight after the launch of *Creative Australia*, Crean was sacked by Gillard and Tony Burke was then appointed as Arts Minister.<sup>76</sup> Then in June 2013 Gillard was herself replaced as Prime Minister by a returning Kevin Rudd. Within a few weeks the Labor Party was out of government. A federal Coalition government was elected in September 2013 with Tony Abbott as Prime Minister and George Brandis as Minister for the Arts. The funding increases recommended by *Creative Australia* that had seemed so urgent, simply disappeared.<sup>77</sup>

## Excellence

As I noted earlier, Australian artists and arts workers are not typically valued or respected by those in power. They are seen as wayward and following the beat of a different drum. They are also likely to be critical of the status quo, regardless of who is in office, and publicly oppose government actions and policies with which they disagree. Coalition governments believe the arts are aligned with the left<sup>78</sup> and insufficiently grateful for the public money they receive.<sup>79</sup>

The belief that artists are ‘irresponsible’ and ‘ungrateful’ influenced the actions of George Brandis when he was the Minister for the Arts from 2013 to 2015. He reacted negatively when artists protested against the source of funding for the 2014 Sydney Biennale by withdrawing their work from exhibition. He said,

Artists, like everybody else, are entitled to voice their political opinions, but I view with deep concern the effective blackballing of a benefactor, implicit in this decision, merely because of its commercial arrangements.<sup>80</sup>

At the time, Transfield was contracted to help manage the Government’s offshore refugee program.<sup>81</sup>

The Chair of the Biennale Board, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, was a member of the Belgiorno-Nettis family who owned Transfield and had been a long-term sponsor of the visual arts in Sydney and the Biennale in particular. Both Brandis and Malcolm Turnbull (then a senior minister in the Government) responded with statements about the poor attitude of artists who rejected this source of financial support.<sup>82</sup> Brandis wrote to the Australia Council, demanding that any arts organisation which refused private sector sponsorship be deemed ineligible for public funding.<sup>83</sup>

Perhaps it was this political action by artists that made Brandis decide he should take direct charge of the arts portfolio. He certainly believed he was more knowledgeable than a number of his predecessors. Journalist Miriam Cosic,

commented on the ABC's program *The Drum* that it was a welcome change to have an 'adult' in charge of the arts.<sup>84</sup> Brandis wanted a direct say in who should receive funding, and to reward those he described as doing 'excellent work'. He argued that there should be more competition in the sector and set up an alternative agency to make this a reality.<sup>85</sup>

In its May 2015 budget, the Government went further and announced that the Minister would create his own arts fund, the 'National Programme for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA)'.<sup>86</sup> To support it, the Government would transfer \$104.7 million over four years from the Australia Council Budget; but the grants of the major performing arts companies would not be cut.

This raid on the Council's budget had a disproportionate impact on smaller arts organisations and individual artists. By creating his own funding agency, Brandis believed he was removing grant-giving from the Council's peer review system; a system that, in his own mind at least, was likely to be biased because it was dominated by artists. No doubt he thought he was doing the arts a service.

What his actions did not consider was that the arts community was still committed to arm's length funding, despite its acknowledged problems. He also failed to recognise that the criterion of 'excellence' in the arts (as in many fields) was not an objective one. Direct political intervention in grant decisions is generally received badly by the arts community and invariably causes significant disruption to the sector. Brandis and the Coalition did not recognise that, while the arts sector is often divided, it is united by the two central principles of arm's length decision-making and peer review.

The actions of the Minister led to a Senate Inquiry into the consequent cuts and generated considerable hostility from many in the arts community.<sup>87</sup> The Inquiry received 2,719 submissions and held public meetings up and down the country.<sup>88</sup> In December 2015 it produced a report for Parliament that included thirteen recommendations, most of which have not yet been implemented.<sup>89</sup> The first recommendation was that the Federal Government develop an arts policy and a

planned approach to the equitable distribution of arts funding. To date this has not been actioned in any way.

The Brandis experiment did not end well. Tony Abbott was replaced by Malcolm Turnbull as leader of the Coalition, and Brandis was packed off to England to become the Australian High Commissioner. A new arts minister, Mitch Fifield, was appointed in September 2015 and he remained in the portfolio until mid-2019. The NPEA's name was changed to the Catalyst Fund, to give it a more benign appearance. However, its original mission remained intact, particularly to operate an arts funding program separate from the Australia Council.

While having different funds for different purposes in the arts is no bad thing, creating a national competitor to the Council, by removing money from its severely limited annual allocation, was a disastrous way to go about it. The Senate Inquiry requested that all the money taken from the Council be restored and a partial restoration of \$32 million was made in late 2015. The Catalyst fund met its demise in 2017 and the Government promised to return the full amount, but today there is still a shortfall of \$23.7 million from the original \$104 million that was extracted.<sup>90</sup>

## The Australia Council

The upshot of all these interventions was that overall funding for the Australia Council was less in 2021 than it had been under the Labor Government in 2013. In 2014, after conducting an internal review, the Council had determined to fund fewer clients but provide them with guaranteed longer-term funding.<sup>91</sup> The agency discovered the serious drawback to this policy in 2015 when it had much less funding available to allocate. The Council changed its decision-making process, dumping most of the art form boards (with the exception of the First Nations Arts and Culture Board), and replacing them with *ad hoc* peer assessment panels, to be convened as needed.

The reaction of the arts sector to these changes was first shock and then silence. The art form boards had been a structural constant of the Council since its establishment and there was much disquiet. While artists were still involved in deciding who got what grants, the ‘peer pool’ that had replaced the boards was not engaged in making policy and had no overview of the sectors as had been characteristic of the older model. The opportunity to explore and assert the social purpose of cultural practice was disappearing under long lists of KPIs.

Since 2016 this has resulted in a dramatic reduction of Council support for arts companies across the country. By 2020, a total of 96 companies had been cut from its client base.<sup>92</sup> Funding for individual artists has also sunk by 70 per cent over 2013–16.<sup>93</sup> These actions have alienated the Council from its core constituency, the arts sector itself. Over the past twenty years the Council has become less engaged with the arts community, less transparent and more bureaucratic.

Because the Council did not publicly oppose the actions of Brandis in 2015, the perception in the arts was that it had become over-compliant and lost its capacity for leadership, and the sector had been left with the responsibility to fight for the restoration of its annual allocation. Many troubling decisions have been made at the Council since 2016 that have led to the end of diverse arts programs in youth arts, community arts, and new technology initiatives. As with cultural policy generally, there has been little consultation with the sector. The Federal Government has continued to distance itself from the Council, while ministers have continued to assert their right to decide arts grants and ignore the existing processes that ensure they are distributed in a fair and equitable manner.

## **Ministerial patronage and government rorting of arts grants**

Direct intervention by governments in arts subsidy has increased dramatically in the past decade. Abuse of the funding system and interference in grant decisions, the

ignoring of peer recommendations to suit political preferences, and the allotting of funds to marginal seats and supporters of a political party. This was the case with funding decisions from the Catalyst Fund in 2016–18, when several arts organisations were given large grants because they were in marginal electorates.<sup>94</sup> It has also happened with various community grants programs.<sup>95</sup> The routing of government grants is not something that can be dismissed lightly.

In New South Wales, the Minister for the Arts, Don Harwin, has taken a ‘hands on’ approach to arts grants on several occasions. In 2018 he admitted to re-directing funding to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, when it had been allocated to 11 other arts organisations by the ministerial arts advisory committee.<sup>96</sup> In 2019 he admitted to allocating regional arts grants based on their political affiliations: thirteen of these projects were not recommended by his own regional arts funding committee as lacking merit.<sup>97</sup> In early 2021 it was revealed that out of a fund of \$50 million set up by the NSW Government in 2020 to support arts organisations and artists affected by covid closures, only \$13 million had been given out. Of this, \$6 million had been allocated to *one* organisation, the Sydney Theatre Company—again at the direction of the Minister.<sup>98</sup>

In late 2020 the then NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, admitted that the allocation of \$140 million in government grants to mostly safe coalition seats prior to the previous state election could be seen as ‘pork barrelling’, but maintained it was not an illegal practice.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the NSW Auditor General, Margaret Crawford, described the practice as ‘lacking integrity’ in a report to the NSW State Parliament in early 2022,<sup>100</sup> and also noted that 96 per cent of a total of Stronger Community grants, worth \$250 million, had been allocated to safe coalition seats in NSW with little evidence to support the decision.<sup>101</sup> In 2021 Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that the awarding of four times more government grants to seats won by the Coalition than Labor, was merely a reflection of good local members.<sup>102</sup>

Normalising unethical behaviour damages the core of Australia’s democracy. The distribution of taxpayer’s money should be treated as a matter requiring the utmost

probity, lest public trust in government is undermined. In the arts it warps the way advocacy is conducted. Arts organisations feel they need to change their tactics to be successful in their grants applications. Ministers are personally lobbied to influence individual decisions; and applicants are nervous about complaining about processes or outcomes, or making of public statements, in case it prejudices future support. The fear of government retribution has become common in the arts sector, which is why artists and arts organisations are loath to publicly criticise funding bodies, even if the decisions they make are seen to be flawed. It is galling that arts organisations are expected to exercise extreme rectitude in their use of public funds, while ministers apparently regard the ethical use of taxpayer's money as immaterial.

## Onward and downward

In the following years the trajectory downward continued. In August 2018, another leadership spill saw Scott Morrison replace Malcolm Turnbull as Prime Minister. Then, following the re-election of the Coalition in 2019, Paul Fletcher became the new Minister for the Arts and Mitch Fifield left domestic politics to become Australia's representative to the United Nations. Since taking office Prime Minister Scott Morrison has shown little interest in our arts. An observation confirmed in late 2019, when the government merged the Office of the Arts into the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communication, and eliminated the title 'arts' altogether. Back in 1972 Gough Whitlam had celebrated the centrality of the arts to the nation's identity by appointing himself arts minister. By the start of 2020, a Coalition Government had rendered the arts structurally and politically invisible.

Perhaps prompted by the protests of the arts community over their treatment during the early stages of the pandemic, a new parliamentary inquiry was announced in August 2020 to be convened by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts. This Inquiry would investigate the

benefits the arts bring to Australia, as well as the significant impacts covid was having on the industry.<sup>103</sup> However, there was confusion from the outset about the terms of reference, which were muddled and overly broad. As part of its methodology, the Inquiry included an on-line survey, accepted written submissions, and invited certain individuals and organisations to address the Committee directly. It received 4,871 responses to the survey, and 352 submissions. On 28 October 2021 the Committee handed its report to Parliament.<sup>104</sup> It contained 21 recommendations and asked for a progress report from the relevant minister by December 2022.<sup>105</sup> *Again it recommended* that the Government develop a national cultural plan to address the short- and long-term needs of the sector. It also recommended that the term ‘arts’ be put back into the title of the department administering the portfolio. The challenge now, as in 2015, is how to get the Coalition government to take on board *any* of these recommendations, however bland, and then move forward with them.

The present federal government has downplayed the role of the Australia Council in arts policy and funding decisions; and shown little understanding of the complexity of the arts and cultural sector. Yet, at the same time, it has tried to dominate the cultural agenda. The RISE fund, its main model of arts and cultural support during the current pandemic, is controlled by the federal minister with advice from non-specialists in his department. This has meant that large amounts of money are being given to RISE applicants with no reference to the quality or significance of their work. Funds are skewed towards activities that propose to employ large numbers or attract large audiences, even if the figures are rather fanciful. There is also a preference for commercial activities. Given how little money has been made available to the arts over the past decade, it is hard to witness large amounts of so-called arts money, going to fund companies like Lego and TedX while artists themselves are struggling to survive. That is why artists must be involved in the decision making and recommendations that surround arts grants. When the arts become a political tool the integrity of arts practice and the protection of cultural heritage both suffer. It is time all political parties stepped out of this relationship and let artists make their own decisions. If the

arts were able to take risks and making decisions, free from intimidation and political influence, the outcome would be better for everyone.

Neither major political party has demonstrated a meaningful commitment to the arts at the federal level since the early 1990s. *Creative Australia* was a short-lived policy that did not deliver any major benefits. In the nine years since the Coalition won government in 2013, the sector has experienced only turmoil and policy neglect, which has reached its pinnacle in the pandemic. The arms' length principle has continued to be eroded; the amount of Australian content in film and television has reduced; engagement with other countries through the showcasing of Australian arts abroad, has flagged; and artistic collaboration with other countries via cultural exchanges has fallen off. Since 2007, federal arts funding as a proportion of the nation's GDP has declined by 18.9 per cent.<sup>106</sup> In 2016 Canada, by contrast, a country not unlike Australia, managed to *increase* its arts and cultural budget by \$1.9 billion.<sup>107</sup>

Corporatisation and economisation at a policy level has changed the way the arts are valued, framed, and managed. In turn, this has negatively impacted on the leadership of arts organisations and promoted economically-fixated relationships between governments and arts practitioners. These changes have not served the best interests of the arts or of Australia, as they devalue artists and arts practice, and convert arts organisations into commercial enterprise. This reductive paradigm focuses on the bottom line rather than the complex nature of arts practice and the unique benefits it delivers to society. Without realising it, the whole concept of what we know as the 'arts', has shifted. What we urgently need now is to resist the urge to rush on to the new and rediscover what is essential by going back to the basics.

## Australia's Unique Resource

The pandemic has been a wake-up call. Now, more than ever, the arts are a part of our daily lives. They are not something only 'the élite' enjoy; they are an expression of the human condition. As part of an interconnected system of collective wellbeing, it is vital to ensure that arts practices continue across our entire community, and that everyone has access to them. The arts reflect our whole culture, and our cultures are what make us who we are. When our culture is at the heart of our collective life, appropriate funding and support will naturally follow.

To move away from reductive concepts we need to think about what we understand by 'the arts', and what they mean to us. What do we understand by 'culture' and how does it manifest in our lives? If we start by asking these questions, we can make more sense of the debate and find a way forward that works in our own unique cultural, social and political context.

While government funding for the arts has been eroding over the past 50 years, public respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture has grown. Art centres like Papunya Tjupi Arts, Maningrida and Warlukurlangu and artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Rover Thomas and Gloria, Doreen and Jeannie Petyarre; the music of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and Yothi Yindi; and the acting, dancing and storytelling of David Gulpilil Ridjimirril Dalaihnngu; dance and theatre companies such as Bangarra and Black Theatre, Ilbijerri, and Kooemba Jdarra and performers such as Deborah Mailman, Rachel Maza, Rachel Perkins, Christine Anu, Deborah Cheetham, Stephen Page, Ernie Dingo, Archie Roach, Wesley Enoch, and Warwick Thornton, have come to represent the very best in contemporary Australian arts practice. Their impact on the wider Australian culture has been profound. They have changed our national culture – and ourselves – and enriched us with their creative work.

First Nations art is a valuable export industry, but traditional arts and cultural practices, as well as languages, are being lost every day and despite their outstanding contribution, and international status, many First Nations artists live and work in conditions that would not be tolerated in the rest of the country. The destruction of Juukun Gorge shocked the world and no amount of commercial profit could compensate for that loss. As a nation, we need to make a profound adjustment, and begin to recognise that our First Nations are a unique cultural *resource* – and follow their example by showing respect for our artists, our culture, our institutions and our environment.

The State has a legitimate role to play in managing the extremes of capitalism, by *regulating* market forces to protect the common good. During the pandemic it has intervened to prevent businesses from profiting from the crisis. The same imperative compels the State to protect our cultural heritage from destruction and foster the arts. Cultural institutions such as libraries, museums and galleries, play a pivotal role in communities that we would be bereft without. They need the capacity to digitise collections, provide adequate storage facilities and display and offer public access to the wonderful treasures they contain. It is a shocking indictment that the National Archives had to resort to ‘crowdfunding’ in order to digitise their collections in 2021, before they were damaged beyond repair.<sup>108</sup> Cultural heritage should be preserved, and protected from destruction by manmade or natural causes. Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) declarations on culture, cultural diversity and arts practices.<sup>109</sup> We are obliged to honour them by ensuring that our museums, galleries, archives and libraries are adequately resourced.

The threats to our culture are not just physical. Monopolisation of our commercial networks and media is seeing Australian stories pushed off our screens by international product. The Murdoch family controls 70% of print media in Australia and has controlling interests in Foxtel and Skynews.<sup>110</sup> Such dominance gives media conglomerates enormous political influence and disproportionate control

over the dissemination of public information. In this environment our public broadcasters, the ABC, SBS and NITV, play a crucial role in creating, reflecting and critiquing Australian culture. However, during the pandemic, rather than supporting the arts sector, the Federal Government suspended local content quotas for commercial broadcasters as part of a ‘support’ package.<sup>111</sup> From 2014 to 2020 the ABC lost \$783 million in government funding.<sup>112</sup> At the same time, the public media agencies have also been subjected to attacks on their integrity.<sup>113</sup>

All this means that there will be decreasing work opportunities for Australian film makers, writers, actors, designers and musicians in the future. But the failure to protect our public broadcasters and maintain Australian content represents more than job losses, it threatens the infrastructure of our national culture.

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There is abundant evidence to show that government’s financial support for the arts and culture has been significantly reduced over many years. Today the arts don’t even rate a mention in the title of the government department responsible for them. Even worse, grants have been routinely awarded to communities in marginal electorates for party political purposes. Yet we know that the arts are a public good and that Australia is a wealthy country that can afford to provide adequate funding for them. So what needs to change?

For the past twenty years arts advocates have asked for a national cultural policy or a national arts plan. This has been reinforced by recommendations from two parliamentary committees within the past seven years. Yet aside from Labor’s short-lived *Creative Australia* in 2013, there has been no attempt since 1994 to address the needs of the sector or create a comprehensive plan for the future at a national level. Relying on the political goodwill of governments to bring about change does not seem to be effective. Policy developed by one side of politics can be quickly undone when the opposition comes to power, and little bipartisan progress is made.

Many countries resolve this problem with a Ministry for Culture. An Australian Ministry of Culture might include the arts, First Nations arts and heritage, public broadcasting, film, and cultural heritage in its ambit. All these areas are interconnected through their association with ‘culture’; and placing them together in an integrated and central location would help bring ‘culture’ into the political mainstream.

While there might be concerns that a Ministry of Culture could extend government control over arts practice, this could be prevented by use of the arm’s length principle of funding and peer review. Political intervention in grant decisions is in no one’s interest and reduces the credibility of the government and the minister concerned. As part of a national cultural heritage framework, all major cultural organisations could then be funded directly by the government from within this Department.

The list would include our major galleries, libraries, museums, archives, and other national entities that are already direct-line funded, such as Screen Australia and the Australia Council. It could also include the major performing arts organisations, as they also represent aspects of our cultural heritage. That is, the State orchestras, the national opera company, and perhaps a national theatre company. Having a Ministry that took responsibility for everything within the ambit of culture, would ensure that national protocols were put in place to protect the national interest against the commercial interests of private enterprise.

All public broadcasting would be part of this ministry to prevent private market forces from dominating the discourse. Entities such as the ABC, SBS and NITV enjoy public trust and are critical to the national public debate, freedom of expression and the right of citizens to hold politicians and their governments to account. They have also played a significant role in presenting Australian stories and commissioning work from Australian writers, film makers and performers. SBS has challenged the homogenous norms of Australian culture and ethnicity and ensured the inclusion of a range of voices in the public space. NITV has provided a voice for our First Nations

people and raised awareness and understanding of the culture within the wider population.

Middle-size and smaller arts organisations and individual artists would continue to be funded by the Australia Council; and film would continue to be funded through Screen Australia. It might also be helpful to establish a new statutory authority, similar to the Australian Foundation for Culture and Humanities that was lost in a change of government thirty years ago. This entity could address the gap between community cultural heritage, local history and community arts, and ensure that grants were awarded at arm's length from political interests.

By establishing these entities and formalising a Ministerial structure that provided a central home for all these activities and functions, the importance of culture, heritage and the arts would be acknowledged in all our lives. Obviously, the new entity would not be a cure-all, but it would allow the development of a critical mass of shared interests and knowledge that would benefit the country. Placing cultural entities, arts, heritage and communication agencies into the one central location would make them more powerful as a group.

A plan for future development of the arts and culture is also essential. A plan would allow goals to be set and ensure that the decisions of government were proactive rather than reactive. The pandemic experience has demonstrated that if we don't develop clear policies, then sectors that are excluded from the political framework, such as the arts, could be sent to the wall. Australia needs to mature as a nation by taking its arts and culture seriously, and a Ministry of Culture would provide a central platform for the nation's identity.

We must all take responsibility for caring for our country and our culture. This means placing the arts at the centre of our thinking. We can do this—and we need to do this—to ensure our nation has a positive and creative future. We are a wealthy country both materially and culturally. We need to acknowledge this and then act upon it, to ensure that all future generations can enjoy their culture and practise their arts. As our First Nations' people have told us, arts, culture and country are all one.

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