

National Cultural Policy Submission



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The Hon. Tony Burke MP
Minister for the Arts,
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations,
Leader of the House

August 22, 2022

Dear Minister Burke,

St Martins Youth Arts Centre in Melbourne, Victoria is a state and national icon whose celebrated workshops and performance programs have produced generations of performers, theatre artists, designers, writers and untold numbers of audiences, creative thinkers, and innovators across multiple industries. Our beloved theatres and rehearsal spaces hold a rich legacy for legion art lovers who contribute to a creative Australia and can trace their genealogy back to St Martins.

Today the young people we serve are in crisis following almost three years of extreme pressure at every level of their existence. According to data from the Australia Talks National Survey, 1 in 5 young people say they are struggling with their mental health. Across every mental-health-related question in the 2021 survey, young people came off worse than before the pandemic, with many dealing with two-year developmental delays socially and at school. St Martins engages with hundreds of these young Australians every week and forms an active part of their recovery via the creative arts. Yet, due to the defunding of our company at the federal level in 2020, called by the Australia Council for the Arts (Australia Council) 'unfunded excellence', we are, for the first time in our history, facing a financial deficit nearing \$225,000 per year, which requires digging into limited reserves.

St Martins' federal funding was withdrawn at the height of a thriving and productive creative output: within six years we made 13 new professional artworks; received nominations for 13 Green Room Awards, winning three; won Melbourne Fringe Best Live Art Award; were nominated for a GLOBE Community Advocacy Award for one of our projects with LGBTIQ+ young people; achieved five-star reviews; worked with diverse young communities such as refugee, trans, First Nations and neurodiverse; all the while offering a nationally unique inclusive workshops program that strives to remove barriers young people face in accessing the performing arts.

The systemic stagnation of federal government funding to Australia Council and the correlated devaluing and de-platforming of arts companies serving young people across the nation over the past decade means thousands of Australian children whose wellbeing is improved by the arts face neglect, and may fall further through the cracks, if our company and youth arts is not financially supported.

Minister, we are profoundly concerned that unless the federal government prioritises young people's arts companies now, our function of providing pathways or 'feeding' the national arts and culture industries will cease, resulting in a catastrophic stifling of Australian arts and culture in the coming years.

St Martins' question is: if young people in the arts are not urgently supported by the federal government now, what will be the government's strategy of sourcing our next generation of Australian artists?

Federal funding via Australia Council is one of the few sources of core operational income for arts companies like ours. Withdrawing core funding means: digging into hard-earned modest reserves;

increasing staff hours on advocacy, fundraising and grant applications; letting staff go; not being able to afford recruiting vacated positions when staff leave; overloading a small team, risking staff burnout; reducing program capacity; reaching fewer children; giving access to fewer children with additional needs; creating fewer performances; reaching fewer audiences; less time to vision and strategise; less growth and innovation; less national and international opportunity and kudos; loss of morale; loss of valuable and expert staff from the arts permanently; being closer to shutting the company doors; and ultimately failing our young people.

St Martins is seeking federal government bridging funding for our core operations of a minimum of \$225,000 per year over 2023 and 2024 to not only be able to continue offering our world-class programs but to learn, grow and improve in order to meet the demonstrated and urgent needs of young people today. These funds are critical to stem the impacts of the prolonged underfunding of our company and sector, while the National Cultural Policy is implemented, and future ongoing funding takes its time to reach young people.

Our nation's professional Young People's Arts industry sits at the intersection of key government portfolios, including Young Australians, Education, Regional and Remote Communities, Mental Health, Health, Youth Justice, and the Arts. Young People's Arts companies such as ours employ professional artists to share their skills and experience in collaboration with young people to realise community goals. As you know, the outcomes of the Young People's Arts industry have a demonstrably positive impact in health, employment, learning and education, innovation, community-building, and resilience.

Minister, we appreciate that the National Cultural Policy will sit across all government portfolios and now with a new Labor government has the capacity to embed active arts engagement in the lives of all Australians. We welcome this Labor government's commitment to our industries, as traditionally Labor has been a force in our corner, both that of the arts and that of young people.

Along with our Prime Minister, St Martins wants 'no one left behind and no one held back,' and we join the Australian Youth Arts Sector, our peak body, Theatre Network Australia, and the Australia Council, to call on the federal government to recognise the present critical need to prioritise Young People and Young People's Engagement in the Arts in the National Cultural Policy.

Our key recommendations to the Minister are:

1. Guarantee "Young People's Engagement" as an urgent priority of the cultural policy with Young People's Arts being included into whole-of-government approaches to learning, wellbeing, mental health, employment, resilience, and artistic excellence;
2. Establish an ongoing funding stream for Young People's Arts and investment in companies whose *core business* is young people's engagement, sufficient to allow growth and enhanced impact, to be administered by the Australia Council for the Arts;
3. Provide separate streams of funding for Young People's engagement and participation to be made available to Health, Employment, Youth Justice, and the Arts, to be co-managed by the Australia Council;
4. Launch independent Young People's Advisory Committees through consultation that reflect the diversity of young Australians, as an ongoing standing committee for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts, ensuring young Australians have a direct voice to the decision makers impacting their lives.

In addition, we offer these responses to relevant pillars of the National Cultural Policy:

A place for every story.

Australian federal arts funding is failing more than 6.4 million young Australians aged between 5 and 24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Where will be the place for the diverse stories of young people if youth arts companies close? Where will kids go who don't fit into sport and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM)? Federal government arts investment has systematically defunded the areas of the professional industry focused on children and young people – from youth orchestras, to youth dance companies, and over the past decade, youth theatre companies and companies making work for a young audience. Arts have been removed as a focus of secondary education, replaced at the benefit of STEM. Numerous Arts Departments in universities across Australia have been closed. The available tertiary arts degrees are significantly more expensive than other degrees, leaving graduates with the prospect of decades of debt, based on the current average income of arts workers.

The Young People's Arts industry uses a rights-based approach to interacting with young people. We specialise in giving young Australians a personal voice in an increasingly international and online world. Our work brokers relationships and starts conversations that connect young people with each other, their families, their communities, with service organisations and with the world.

There is now an opportunity for Labor to embed the arts in the lives of all young Australians and to reverse the negative trends that have shut down young people's pathways into the arts by making Young People's Engagement in the Arts a priority of the National Cultural Policy.

The evidence for the beneficial impacts of participation in Young People's Arts is unequivocal. There is an extensive body of research both within Australia and internationally that demonstrates that engaging young people in the performing arts delivers multiple health, social and civic benefits. These are detailed in the Youth Arts Sector Submission to the Minister.

"It is now widely documented...that those young people whose learning is embedded in the Arts achieve better grades and overall test scores, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom and have a more positive self-concept than those that are deprived of arts experiences. In addition, interestingly, they are more likely to become involved in community service." (Professor Robyn Ewing – Australian Education Review)

St Martins specialises in deep and long-term engagement that slowly yet surely contributes to the well being of young people affecting every aspect of their lives and communities. From young people and parents:

"Attending St Martins has been a defining factor in the person I have become today."

"You have changed my child's life. You literally helped keep her alive when she was preoccupied by suicidal thoughts."

"My child is bullied at school. St Martins has been the only place, apart from home, that they feel fully accepted."

Strong Institutions

Australia is recognised for producing exceptional work with and for young people in the world. Young People's Arts companies in Australia share an understanding that improving the lives of young people now can change generations of Australians. The Young People's Theatre sector specialises in facilitating opportunities for young people to be and feel seen and heard, actively prioritising the needs and empowerment of First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, refugee, regional, and remote, socially disadvantaged and disabled young people.

St Martins and its sister organisations around Australia create arts initiatives that get young people interacting with each other and the wider community. Young people must be recognised within Australian society, with opportunities to share their own stories, listen to others, and build relationships across generations.

Yet St Martins and other respected performing arts companies engaging with young people have been told: "there is not enough funding to go around." Over the past ten years, the Australia Council has withdrawn funding from:

Arena Theatre Company (Vic); Backbone Youth Arts (Qld); Barking Gecko Theatre (WA); Canberra Youth Theatre (ACT); Cirkidz (SA); Jigsaw Theatre Company (ACT); La Mama Theatre (Vic); Lowdown (national); Monkey Baa Theatre Company (NSW); Outback Theatre for Young People (NSW); PACT (NSW); Platform Youth Arts (Vic); Polyglot Theatre (Vic); Riverland Youth Theatre (SA); Shopfront Arts Co-op (NSW); Slingsby (SA); St Martins Youth Arts Centre (Vic); Tantrum Youth Theatre (NSW); The Blue Room (WA); Urban Myth Theatre of Youth (SA); Southern Edge Youth Theatre (SA); and Young People and the Arts Australia (national).

There are now as few as five federally funded youth arts companies remaining across the nation.

The current government now has the power to strengthen the nation's institutions that specialise in connecting professional artists and creative practice with young people. We are a tiny, underfunded sector, making a huge ripple effect.

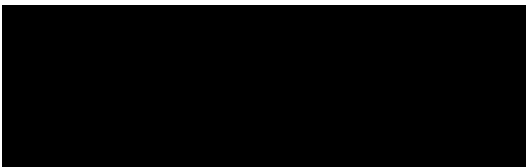
What if we were radically funded, rather than barely funded? Let us imagine what the children who say these words could then achieve:

*"I am a pebble on the rocky road
And I feel like nothing can stop me.
With pebbles
When you have them in your hand
You can't snap them
Or crush them in your fingers.
So they're really strong.
I am this pebble on the rocky road.
Unstoppable.
Uncrushable."*

- Children from Dandenong Primary School, partners of St Martins' November production, in the Royal Botanic Gardens, *Gene Tree: Listen. Now. Again*

St Martins welcomes dialogue with the Minister and federal government on the urgent issues the wider Youth Arts Industry face and we now and hopes that together we can imagine a future of transformation and infinite possibilities for young people in the arts.

Yours sincerely,



Nadja Kostich
CEO and Artistic Director
St Martins Youth Arts Centre

