

National arts policy and the new federal government: what is to be done?

The recent Federal election has thrown up a challenge to the two-party preferred electoral system and presents an opportunity for a fresh approach to many long entrenched structural inequalities within Australian society. This opportunity is made possible due to the rejection by a significant number of Australian citizens of amoral and cruel political creeds which ignore the human consequences of poverty, racism, misogyny, and climate change.

During the election campaigns the two major political parties shied away from committing to anything much in relation to cultural development and the arts. In the case of the Coalition this silence is business as usual, demonstrating their disregard for those activities that challenge the neo-liberal interpretation of the human condition and the Coalition's effective silencing of most arts and cultural expression through neglect and disparagement. In the case of the Labor Party, I can only hope that their reticence during the campaign to commit to any significant changes in the role of the Federal Government in arts and cultural development is due to their greater insights into the serious structural inequalities in all Federal Australian governments' approach to these aspects of the human condition.

As part of my research into the development of Australian Federal arts policy from 1993-2015, my conversations with former arts ministers, their staff, arts policy advocates, and artists, revealed that these structural inequalities have been established and sustained by both major political parties. These insights provide a roadmap into what needs to be done to redress this situation and to create an environment in which arts and culture can flourish.

Federal political terms are short: too short when you consider the work that now needs to be done in many policy areas that have languished in what amounts to nearly three decades of Coalition rule, interrupted by six years of Labor governance. The additional challenge for arts and cultural policy is that many of the structural issues impeding their development have been evolving since the early 1980s.

The Federal government policymaking process was significantly changed by the Hawke Labor Government in 1983 by their desire to exert more control over the public service. Since then, tighter control over the administration of government agencies has been accompanied by an increase in the power of the political executive: ministers, their staff, and the Cabinet. In political terms, this has been a bi-partisan approach for over four decades. Recent events demonstrate the extent to which politicians now intervene in what were established in many policy jurisdictions as arm's length decision-making processes relegated to either the public service or independent authorities.

These shifts have resulted in an increase in the systemic lobbying of politicians, including Federal arts ministers, and their advisors. This has had the effect of reducing national arts and cultural policy to a list of funding initiatives, and advocacy for arts and cultural policy has become constrained by who

can get a meeting with the minister. This trend has been intensified by the instrumentalisation of all government policy: the expectation that government funding will result in social and economic returns. This transactional emphasis has often overlooked the cultures of First Nations, abandoned a commitment to cultural pluralism, and failed to acknowledge and support opportunities for Australian citizens to express their creativity. Instead, it has encouraged the evolution of explicit and implicit policies that favour the large mainstream arts organisations, something which Australian federal governments assume can happen only at the expense of the community, smaller companies, and individual artists.

These shifts have eroded governments' commitment to acknowledging the rights of cultural citizens as creators. Citizens are characterised only as consumers and spectators whose access to the arts is interpreted as the market distribution of cultural goods. These changes have also reduced cultural pluralism to an anodyne concept of diversity in which 'exotic' cultures are a marketing tool for government in attracting and securing economic and social objectives.

Another significant change has been to the two significant institutions that are responsible for the development and administration of national arts and cultural policy: the Australia Council and the Federal Department for the Arts.

The incremental fiddling with the structure of the Australia Council over decades has slowly eroded the art-form Boards. In his 1972 election speech, Gough Whitlam outlined the skeleton of this new entity:

The existing Commonwealth agencies should be brought within a single Council set up by statute. The Council will be based on a number of autonomous boards with the authority to deal with their own budget allocation and staff...These boards would have substantial independence and authority to make decisions. Indeed, in their own field of responsibility they would be the major source of initiative in policy and communication with those involved in the Arts concerned (Whitlam, November 13, 1972, p. 28).

Whitlam's advisor at the time, Nugget Coombs, confirms that Whitlam's speech incorporated the key elements proposed for the Council's statute (Coombs, 1991, p. 252), including the need for an autonomous organisation. The themes of an arm's length relationship from government and arts sector involvement in the Council became enshrined in the Council's statute. The Council boards were established as the Council's major decision-making entities and were expected to consult closely with the arts sector and communities of interest with the view to formulating policy which reflected the needs and priorities of these sectors: a kind of bottom-up policy development model. As defined by Whitlam and Coombs, the role of the Council was to ensure that these Boards received the resources and support necessary to fulfil their role (Coombs, 1991, pp. 253-254).

The autonomy of the Boards was challenged in the early 1980s when attempts by two of these boards to change funding priorities in line with evolving cultural developments were stymied by Hawke's reallocation of the Australian Opera and orchestra funding from the Council to the Federal arts department. All Federal governments' successive fiddling with the Council structure since then has displaced what began as a bottom-up approach to policy development with a top-down model which has removed policy making from the purview of artists and communities. This fiddling, and a series of raids on the Council's funding by incumbent arts ministers, have led to the effective erosion of the resources, authority, and independence of the Australia Council. Perhaps more importantly, it has led to the erosion of confidence by governments and by the arts sector in the Council's ability to perform its role as a significant policy maker and advocate for the arts.

The Federal Department for the Arts has also suffered its share of intervention. The changes in the relationship between governments and the public service initiated by the Hawk Government and continued and strengthened by successive Coalition governments led to the loss of the "craft of an activist" public service along with their capacity to develop policy (Tracey & Podger, 2010, p. 51). The Federal Department for the Arts' capacity for activism was further compromised by the cuts to staffing by both the Coalition and Labor and the endless rearrangement of their administrative base: "five different ministries in almost as many years" (Schultz 2015, p. 214). When Labor Arts Minister Simon Crean asked them to lead the development of a Federal Arts Policy (Creative Australia, 2013), the minister, his staff and Australia's arts policy advocates, expected an arts policy to reflect an understanding and consideration of the bigger picture, including the activities of the states and local government. The Department was looking at the policy as a way of solving the serious financial problems of the national collecting institutions in their portfolio.

These structural phenomena have taken almost four decades to evolve, and they won't disappear in a heartbeat. The time for fiddling is over. It is time to discuss the kind of organisations we should have in charge of Australia's cultural and artistic development. What is their role and what will make them fit for purpose? The new government can make a beginning on this by garnering the trust and involvement of the broad community in these conversations. These discussions need to go beyond engagement with the larger and more powerful arts advocates. *All* Australian citizens engage with at least one of our diverse and distinctive creative cultural practices which are created and sustained by individuals, groups, communities, and institutions. Many of these have been disenfranchised in arts and cultural policy development to date: First Nations, non-professional creators, and cultural communities who valorise genres for creative expression which are largely unrepresented in the activities and governance of Federally subsidised arts and cultural organisations.

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