

Australia: arts funding crisis ignored in federal election

Richard Phillips
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Australian federal elections during the past three decades often saw the major parties—Labor and the Liberal-National coalition—attempt to present themselves as serious supporters of the arts. Lavish policy launches and various funding initiatives, aimed at securing the support of well-known actors, artists, writers and filmmakers, were common features of the campaigns.

By contrast, this year's election, one of the longest in recent times, and characterised by an extraordinary range of targeted vote-buying promises, saw the major parliamentary parties all but ignoring the arts. The prevailing attitude within Australia's political elite is that issues relating to the creative arts will not affect the election outcome, and they are therefore of no immediate practical use.

Labor and Coalition arts policies are virtually identical with only slight increases for museums and galleries, the Arts Council and the local film industry. Nothing, however, has been promised to alleviate the serious financial problems confronting major cultural institutions.

Adjusted for inflation, arts funding has declined in most areas over the past decade. Consecutive Labor and Coalition governments, in state and federal spheres, have cut back on public funding for the arts, threatening the very existence of theatre companies, orchestras and other cultural institutions.

While the Keating Labor government often voiced platitudes about assisting the arts, it presided over a growing financial crisis in the major cultural institutions. In 1997, a year after it had been thrown out of office, a number of the largest arts companies faced serious and escalating debts. This decline accelerated under the Howard government, which slashed funding in key areas.

Government inquiries, such as the Nugent report into the performing arts and the Myer investigation into the visual arts, while hailed by the corporate media, were tailored to force various arts bodies into further cuts and to restructure their operations, in order to accommodate to the dictates of the market. Publicly funded arts institutions and projects had to produce measurable returns or perish.

Three areas—classical music and opera, theatre and film—highlight the extent of the problems.

The Sydney Theatre Company, for example, one of the country's major dramatic arts companies, has been forced to cut costs by slashing the number of actors used in productions. In 1980 it employed 25 actors for its staging of *Cyrano*. When the play was staged in 1999, the cast had been reduced to half that number, while today, most of the company's productions use no more than eight actors.

These cutbacks are mirrored in other Australian companies. The Griffin theatre, which specialises in new Australian drama, has such a tight budget that it does not even consider plays that require more than five or six actors in the cast.

Two state symphonies are in danger of closure, and finance is so tight that renowned orchestras such as the Sydney Symphony have been forced into generating income by functioning as a backing band for high-profile pop singers. Some orchestras have attempted to keep afloat by selling "performance naming" rights or establishing joint partnerships with corporations. In 2000, for example, the Australian Youth Orchestra was temporarily renamed the GlobalFreeway Australian Youth Orchestra, after the internet provider company agreed to provide some funding.

The number of professional Australian opera companies has also been reduced over the past decade,

with the Victorian State Opera “merging” with Opera Australia in 1996, and performances by all companies reduced.

Likewise, the Australian film industry is in serious decline, threatening the jobs and livelihoods of hundreds of skilled technicians and actors.

Between 1996 and 2001, the Howard government slashed more than \$100 million from local film and television funding, and has maintained an ongoing assault on the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a key production facility and training ground for technicians.

State funding for local cinema has declined in real terms, with bodies such as the Film Finance Corporation receiving less government money. Private funding of local cinema has also seriously plummeted in the last two years.

According to an Australian Film Commission report in August, annual investment in local film and television has dropped from \$45.5 million in 2001/02 to only \$17.2 million in the last financial year. While 41 Australian features were made in 1997-98, only 19 local movies were made in Australia in 2003-4. And this sharp decline is expected to continue with the government, backed by Labor and senior Australian Film Corporation officials, declaring that future state funds for local cinema should be based on project “marketability”.

While Labor and the Coalition promised to increase film funding during this year’s election campaign, the pledges are equally inadequate. Labor promised \$50 million over the next 12 months if elected, and said it would hold an investigation into the industry. The Coalition offered to spend \$35 million over the next four years. These amounts are laughable, and less than the average budget of a single Hollywood movie today.

During the election campaign, the so-called opposition parliamentary parties—the Greens and Democrats—have declared their support for public funding of the arts and proclaimed artistic and cultural development a basic human right. But these organisations share the same market outlook as the Howard government and Labor, and are therefore incapable of overcoming the precipitous decline in the creative arts.

Another indictment of these organisations has been their silence over the escalating censorship measures

imposed by the Howard government and its ongoing assault on freedom of artistic expression over the past eight years. These attacks saw the cancellation of the *Sensation* exhibition in Canberra, after the intervention of former arts minister Richard Alston, and the banning of several movies, including most recently *Ken Park* from the 2003 Sydney Film Festival.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party is the only party that has opposed these anti-democratic measures, making explicit calls throughout the campaign for massive funding for the arts. Expanded state funding and the establishment of a living wage for professional artists in all fields are vital parts of the development of a genuinely progressive and humane society.

The struggle to defend and advance all forms of artistic creativity is bound up with the fight for a new intellectual and political climate. This involves nothing less than a direct challenge to the profit system. It also means that artists and other creative workers must reject all forms of the cultural nationalism espoused by the parliamentary parties. As history demonstrates, artistic development, like all other forms of human endeavour, can only go forward on the basis of broad collaboration between co-thinkers across all geographic boundaries. Just as no scientist can progress if limited to the data and resources available on the national scene, so artists cannot develop if confined to a diet of local culture. This is the challenge raised by the Socialist Equality Party during the 2004 election campaign.



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