

Australian government threatens arts funding following Sydney Biennale protest over refugees

Richard Phillips
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The Australian government has reacted with menacing threats to arts funding after the board of the Sydney Biennale, a contemporary art festival, renounced its sponsorship arrangement with Transfield Holdings, an Australian transnational involved in construction, services and infrastructure.

The Biennale board made the decision on March 7 after more than 40 artists called for an end to the funding deal in protest over Transfield's \$1.22 billion contract to provide "garrison and welfare" services to the Australian refugee detention camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Nine artists withdrew their exhibits from the festival.

In a blatant act of political censorship directed against artists, Attorney-General George Brandis wrote to the Australia Council—the official arts funding body—on Wednesday demanding new protocols to punish any organisation that rejected corporate sponsorship.

Brandis declared that the Biennale board's decision was an "appalling insult" to the Belgiorno-Nettis family, which owns and runs Transfield. Brandis warned that the government would reconsider government funding for the arts festival when it came up for renewal in 2015.

The attorney-general issued a broader threat, demanding that the Australia Council formulate new policies to cut funds to any art or cultural agency that "refuses funding offered by corporate sponsors, or terminates a current funding agreement."

If the Australia Council did not urgently develop these policies, Brandis warned, he had the authority to direct it to do so.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government is seeking to suppress any, even limited criticism, of its

reactionary asylum seeker regime, which directly violates core legal and democratic rights, including the right of refugees, under international law, to flee persecution and oppression.

Since last September, the Abbott government has continued on from where the former Rudd and Gillard governments left off. These Labor governments re-opened the Nauru and Manus Island camps, which had been central to the previous Howard Coalition government's "Pacific solution" of banishing asylum seekers to indefinite detention in hellholes on remote islands. Labor further intensified the draconian regime by declaring that no refugee incarcerated in these camps would ever be permitted to live in Australia.

Upon taking office, the Abbott government militarised the policy, labelling it Operation Sovereign Borders and placing Army Lieutenant-General Angus Campbell in command. Operation Sovereign Borders includes navy ships forcibly returning asylum-seekers to Indonesia. It also involves military-style censorship over these operations and the soul destroying conditions on Manus Island and Nauru, where more than 2,000 asylum seekers are currently imprisoned.

Transfield's new contract to manage these camps became widely known following the government-ordered crackdown against protesting refugees on Manus Island. Reza Berati, a 23-year-old Iranian asylum seeker, was battered to death and more than 70 others injured. This violence, intended to send an intimidating message in order to deter all refugees from seeking asylum in Australia, is a warning of the police-state methods being prepared to deal more broadly with all working-class opposition to government policy (see: "Australian refugee camp atrocity: The class issues").

The Abbott government is now threatening to punish and blacklist any arts body or other state-sponsored agency that dares to criticise, or tolerate criticism by artists and others, of this anti-refugee regime. Any objections are regarded as tantamount to treason.

Brandis's threats echoed angry denunciations in the corporate media of the artists for challenging the sponsorship arrangements, and the biennale board for "capitulating" to the artists' demands. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial declared it was a "disturbing" result of "vociferous lobbying by a lynch mob of local and international artists." Instead of saying "good riddance" to the artists who decided to withdraw their work, the board, in an act of "abject cowardice," had "caved in to mob rule."

Similarly in January, the government and corporate media unleashed a witch-hunt against the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) after it reported refugees' allegations that they were assaulted and their hands burnt by navy personnel as they were forced back to Indonesia. Abbott and other senior ministers attacked the ABC, demanding that its general manager Mark Scott apologise for its news report. Abbott accused the network of calling into question the "professionalism of our military personnel."

Having laid the foundations of the anti-refugee policy, the Labor opposition voiced mild criticism of Brandis. Labor's arts spokesman Mark Dreyfus told the ABC that Brandis "seems to be threatening artists' funding if they disagree with government policy." Dreyfus's posturing as a defender of freedom of political expression is sheer hypocrisy after his denunciations, as the previous Labor government's attorney-general, of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Nor are Brandis's directives to the Australia Council entirely unprecedented. In 2008, the New South Wales state Labor government shut down an exhibition by internationally acclaimed photographer Bill Henson. Police threatened the photographer and the gallery owners with prosecution on bogus child pornography charges.

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd vilified Henson's work as "revolting" and directed Arts Minister Peter Garrett to order the Australia Council and Screen Australia to formulate a code of behaviour for artists working with children. The new protocols had nothing

to do with protecting children. They were an attempt by Labor to discipline artists and cultivate support among right-wing Christian fundamentalists.

Greens leader Christine Milne is just as two-faced as Dreyfus. She said the Greens would "block any moves to require artists to take corporate money regardless of the ethical considerations involved," declaring that the government's threats were a "throwback to the Howard years." She said nothing about "the Labor years." For three years, the Greens directly propped up the minority Labor government as it re-instituted and stepped-up the brutal "offshore" refugee detention regime.

The Abbott government's reaction to the limited protests of a small group of artists is indicative of acute political nervousness in ruling circles over popular opposition to its illegal treatment of refugees. More broadly, there is anxiety throughout the corporate and political establishment over growing working-class hostility to the ever-deepening cuts to jobs, working conditions and essential social programs, such as welfare, education and health.

The official and media response to the Sydney Biennale protest is not only a threat to the rights of artists. It is another sign that even more repressive measures are being prepared to deal with resistance throughout the working class as a whole.

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