

Arts funding slashed in Australian budget

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Australia's Liberal-National coalition government has cut \$110 million from arts funding together with a \$120 million reduction to state-funded broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, in its May 13 budget. Arts Minister and Attorney-General George Brandis told the media on May 15, three days after the budget was announced, that the government measures were "generous" and "a remarkable outcome" for the arts sector.

These claims are absurd. In line with the social austerity measures unleashed against youth, aged-pensioners and other sections of the working class, the budget hits thousands of creative workers and technicians. These workers are generally associated with smaller artistic ventures and production companies and live a hand-to-mouth existence.

Over the next four years, \$28 million will be slashed from the Australia Council, the official government arts funding body, \$33.8 million from the Ministry of Arts, and \$25.1 million from Screen Australia.

The Australia Council cutbacks are directed against so-called "uncommitted funding" and will hit small performance companies and lesser known artists—i.e., those least able to absorb any loss of funding. The Council, for example, offers grants to musicians for touring, recording and promotion and recently provided over \$400,000 for several independent record labels and new releases. These small-scale operations are not expected to survive.

Australia Council officials have said that the impact on the country's 28 major performance companies—ballet, opera and drama—would be minimal because they are locked into annual or triennial contracts. But no details have been released.

Screen Australia is yet to provide any information about the impact on movie production but the budget measures, including the cuts to the ABC and SBS networks are expected to result in the loss of hundreds of jobs in the film industry. Film production contributes

about \$3 billion annually to the Australian economy. A number of planned feature films and documentaries could end up being shelved over the next four years.

Other government cutbacks include, \$3 million from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, \$1.8 million from South Australia's Asia Pacific Centre for Arts, which sponsors arts exchanges with Asia, \$10 million from Australian interactive games fund and the \$6.4 million from Get Reading!, which involves speaking tours by selected Australian authors and other techniques to encourage reading. The interactive games fund and Get Reading! programs are being axed.

The government claims that \$2.4 million will be saved through the merger of so-called "back office" administration at the National Portrait Gallery, National Gallery of Australia, National Library of Australia, Old Parliament House, Film and Sound Archive, National Museum of Australia, National Archives and National Library. This will seriously impact on the jobs and operations of these vital Canberra-based national collection agencies.

By contrast, the Abbott government awarded \$6.3 million, including \$5.4 million for continued "operational funding" of Creative Partnerships Australia, to boost corporate arts sponsorship and support. Philanthropy Australia hailed the announcement and declared that it, "welcomed the government's desire to foster a culture of philanthropy in Australia." The increased funding is in line government plans to further privatise arts funding, which will impose additional commercial pressures on creative workers, undermine their artistic and political independence and prepare the way for future arts funding cuts.

Labor's arts spokesman Mark Dreyfus declared the arts cuts to be "devastating" while claiming that Labor had boosted spending on the sector during its term in office. But according to ArtsHub, there has been

virtually no difference in arts spending by Labor and Liberal federal governments, since 2002. Each spent just over \$4 billion on arts when in office, a figure that constitutes a real cut, when adjusted for inflation.

Michael Lynch, former head of the Australia Council and the Sydney Opera House, denounced the Abbott government's arts funding cuts as "cultural vandalism." This was echoed by National Association of Visual Arts chief Tamara Winikoff, who said the budget "shields the rich [arts companies] and impacts most adversely on those who can least afford it. The Australian community is the loser because new talent will be squashed."

Australian writers issued an Open Letter last week opposing the health, education and welfare spending cuts. It explained that the arts sector employed over half a million people and warned that the cuts "would devastate smaller organisations."

The budget, it said, would "rob Australia of a whole generation of artists, writers, publishers, editors, theatre makers, actors, dancers and thinkers ... We fear the prospect of a world of culture and art that is unaffordable to the majority of Australians."

Reacting to these concerns Prime Minister Tony Abbott told the Australian Book Industry Awards last Friday that his government was "committed" to supporting the arts and claimed that Attorney-General Brandis had "substantially protected arts funding." These claims are false. More ominously they indicate that even more severe arts cuts being prepared for future budgets.

The recently released National Commission of Audit indicates what is being considered. It called for a merger of the Australia Council, the corporate sponsorship body Creative Partnerships Australia, and Screen Australia, with a dramatic 50 percent funding cut to the latter organisation.

At the same time, the government is also using funding as a means of disciplining the arts community. Three months ago Attorney-General Brandis demanded the Australia Council develop new protocols to punish any organisation that rejected corporate sponsorship on political grounds.

This explicit act of political censorship was in response to a boycott protest by 40 artists over Transfield Holding's sponsorship of the Sydney Biennale. Transfield had just been awarded a \$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.



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