

# Australian government undermines arts funding body

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In its 2015 budget, the Liberal-National coalition government stepped up the assault on arts spending with a series of cutbacks to arts and cultural institutions.

This included a \$3 million reduction in Screen Australia's budget, on top of a \$38 million cut last year, and \$4 million slashed from the budgets of various national galleries and museums. The so-called Administered Program Indexation Pause on community radio stations will be extended by two years—in effect a \$3 million funding reduction.

The main shift in the arts measures, however, is the undermining of the Australia Council for the Arts, the country's peak cultural funding body.

Over the next four years, \$104.8 million, or approximately 16 percent of total funding, will be cut from the council's annual budget. The money will be diverted into a new National Program for Excellence in the Arts, under the control of the federal arts ministry.

There was no prior consultation with Australia Council officials or other arts administrators and no precise details have been issued on how the "excellence" program will operate. Grants from the new agency, however, will be at the discretion of the arts ministry.

The Australia Council's influence will be further diminished by its loss of responsibility for Visions of Australia, Festivals Australia and the Major Festivals Initiative—all to be taken over by the arts ministry.

The funding body will lose a further \$1.8 million a year via the imposition of cost-cutting "efficiency dividends" that will directly impact on its ArtStart, Capacity Building and Artists in Residence programs. This follows last year's \$6.3 million government grant to Creative Partnerships Australia, a private agency whose purpose is to boost corporate arts sponsorship

and establish the basis for further funding cuts.

Arts Minister George Brandis issued a statement claiming that arts funding had been "limited almost exclusively to projects favoured by the Australia Council." The new agency, he said, would provide funds to "a wider range of arts companies and practitioners, while at the same time respecting the preferences and tastes of Australia's audiences."

Brandis's statement is a clear attack on the council for simply carrying out its remit, that is, to award arts grants independently of the federal government.

Established in the early 1970s, the council was meant to prevent political interference in the distribution of government grants. Its grants are awarded on the basis of independent peer group reviews.

The National Program for Excellence in the Arts is aimed at sidelining the Australia Council and opening the way for greater government control over the funding of cultural institutions and artists. As a result, the new funding mechanism could be used to politically silence or discipline artists.

Brandis has form on the political censorship of artists. Last year, 40 artists staged a political boycott of the Sydney Biennale to protest its sponsorship by Transfield Holding. The corporation 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.

Brandis furiously denounced the protest. When the Sydney Biennale management refused to condemn the artists' boycott, he ordered the Australia Council to develop new protocols to punish any organisation that rejected corporate sponsorship on political grounds.

Last week Brandis referred to "respecting the preferences and tastes of Australia's audiences." These

are code words for dispensing with the Australia Council's peer-group reviews and rewarding favoured artists and institutions deemed to be popular.

In 2014, Brandis told the media he was "more interested in funding arts companies that cater to the great audiences that want to see quality drama, or music or dance, than I am in subsidising individual artists responsible only to themselves."

More than 3,600 writers, visual artists, filmmakers, publishers and other cultural sector workers issued an open letter declaring that the government's "massively defunding" of the Australia Council was "deeply disturbing" and demanding that it "reverse all proposed cuts to the arts sector." Several academics have written op-ed comments attacking the move as the most serious assault on independent arts funding in the past four decades.

Rodney Hall, former chair of the Australia Council, opposed Brandis's "excellence" program. "From the artist's point of view, and the public point of view, it's a disaster," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "The Australia Council existed to give the public creative resources they would not otherwise have and allow artists to make a living in Australia... This is all at risk."

Hall pointed out that the undermining of the Australia Council began under the previous Labor government. "Simon Crean as arts minister repealed the Australia Council Act and replaced it with a much inferior piece of work... dismantled the board structure, dismantled the very structure by which every level of the Australia Council had kept in touch with arts practice."

Brandis claimed that the Australia Council cuts would end the peak funding body's "monopoly" and declared that there had been "extremely enthusiastic" reaction to the measures.

One commentator hailing the new funding model was right-wing *Daily Telegraph* columnist Tim Blair. He described the Australia Council "as a multi-million tax playpen" that created "a spineless movement of grant-dependent tax sucklings."

Blair concluded that the Australia Council "should be shut down, along with just about all arts funding. This would save close to \$700 million per year and—absolutely guaranteed—would result in better art."

While overall arts funding has been slashed under Coalition and Labor governments, money is being

lavished on projects associated with the official "celebration" of Australian involvement in the slaughter of World War I. Over the past two years there has been a barrage of war-themed works and events. This includes music, dance, drama, visual arts, travelling military displays, seminars and books, as well as films and numerous television programs.

The millions of dollars spent on militarist propaganda, in order to condition the public for further wars, is the clearest indication that culture and the arts are being marshalled to serve the interests of Australian capitalism.



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