

Australian governments' decade-long cultural wrecking operation

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Over the past decade, Australian governments have drastically reduced the country's already-limited public funding to the arts. In the last three years alone, the Liberal-National coalition government—first under Tony Abbott and now Malcolm Turnbull, who previously postured as a “friend of the arts”—has cut more than \$300 million from federal arts spending.

Thousands of jobs have been eliminated in the sector and the career hopes dashed of hundreds of young people in the visual and performing arts, literature, film and music.

While the cuts are part of the government's social austerity measures on all social spending, its actions are not just driven by financial considerations. The national arts budget, after all, is miniscule compared to the billions spent on tax cuts for the rich, or new weaponry and the promotion of militarism. The assault on state-funding of the arts—in Australia and around the world—is motivated by deeper political considerations.

In its struggle against the decaying feudal order, the bourgeoisie in previous centuries sought to lift society's intellectual and cultural climate in order to challenge the old aristocratic regimes. It championed artistic freedom, recognising its role in enhancing the critical capacities of the population.

Today, such sentiments are anathema to the ruling elites, who regard genuinely critical and creative voices with suspicion or outright hostility.

To maintain political power and justify unprecedented levels of social inequality, attacks on democratic rights and preparations for war, governments everywhere seek to keep the population ignorant, demoralised and in a state of political confusion. That means eviscerating anything that inspires thoughtful reflection, humane sensitivity and honest artistic work.

This is the essential purpose of the Australian government's gutting of the Australia Council for the Arts, the country's nominally independent arts funding body, and the network of federally funded museums, libraries, art galleries and other key cultural institutions.

Prior to 1967, federal arts funding in Australia was virtually non-existent. Apart from small amounts to a few well-known authors via the Commonwealth Literary Fund, which was set up in the late 1930s, and the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1954 to assist large performing arts companies, Canberra gave nothing to assist or encourage artistic activity.

The Australian government is turning the clock back to these dark days, forcing artists to rely on corporate sponsorship or rich benefactors.

Last May, after a \$100 million reduction in government funds, the Australia Council was forced to cut its grants to 62 small- and medium-sized arts organisations, many of them outside the major state capitals and in remote areas. Grants to individual artists were also drastically reduced—down from over 1,140 in 2014 to just 700 in 2016.

While it is not possible here to list the scores of organisations destroyed by these policies, the damage caused and the social implications have been far-reaching. Nothing short of a cultural wrecking operation is

underway that impacts most heavily on young artists, the smaller arts companies and those providing vital arts programs in regional and marginalised communities.

The destruction of *ArtStart* and numerous other financial assistance schemes for young writers, visual artists, musicians and others, for example, prevents all but the sons and daughters of the wealthy from working full-time in their chosen artistic field. Without these grants, it is impossible for young artists to live while devoting adequate time and effort to their work—to study, experiment, take risks, make mistakes and gain the necessary experience to expand their creative vision and skills.

Australia Council cuts to regional arts communities and remote indigenous settlements have been equally devastating. Arts programs in many indigenous communities play a vital role in enhancing social well-being. In many cases they provide the only source of employment or creative outlet in these desperately poor areas.

As well, arts programs for the disabled and the mentally ill in cities and towns across Australia have been targeted. Starting this year, funding will cease to 13 organisations that deliver remedial treatment arts courses to over 16,000 people across Australia.

David Doyle, head of Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts in Western Australia, told a 2015 Senate inquiry into federal funding that the cuts were catastrophic. Community arts programs for the disabled, he said, were being hit by a “perfect storm”—the Australia Council cuts, government “reforms” of national disability and health services and falling sponsorship caused by the collapse of the mining boom.

Helen Bock from Community Arts Network SA told the same inquiry that the government cutbacks would mean that “ordinary Australians will have less or no access to the arts ... I have always talked about the arts as the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’ Now what we are going to have is the ‘haves’ and the ‘have mores’...”

Bock correctly observed: “Ordinary Australians will miss out on that transition to appreciating the arts. Organisations will miss out on having their lives improved, having opportunities to build their self-esteem and confidence—a stepping stone and having the experience of creating things ...”

Another part of Canberra's wrecking operation is the annual “efficiency dividend”—an Orwellian cost-cutting measure first introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1987 and imposed on federally funded cultural institutions and all public sector agencies.

Labor's “efficiency dividend” policy, which has been retained by consecutive federal governments, forces management at the National Library, National Museum, National Gallery and other important cultural bodies, including most recently the Australia Council, to reduce annual operational costs by up to 2.5 percent. This has led to the destruction of hundreds of jobs and a serious decrease in services—shorter opening hours, fewer resources, fewer exhibitions and in some cases outright closures.

The Australia Council cuts run parallel with growing demands in government and right-wing media circles for grants to be stopped to

individuals and arts organisations that dare to speak out against the government or challenge policy.

George Brandis, then arts minister in the Abbott government, made this abundantly clear in 2014 when he ordered that the Australia Council establish new grant guidelines. Any artist who rejected corporate sponsorship for political reasons should not be given Australia Council funds, he declared.

Brandis' diktat was in response to a decision by nine visual artists who withdrew their work from the Sydney Biennale because the event was sponsored by Transfield, one of the companies running Australia's repressive offshore asylum seeker facilities. The arts minister's demands were echoed by various right-wing columnists and radio shock jock commentators.

Tim Blair at the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* supported Brandis and denounced the Australia Council as a "multi-million-dollar tax playpen."

The Council, Blair said, had perpetrated a "spineless movement of grant-dependent tax sucklings" and "should be shut down, along with just about all arts funding. This would save close to \$700 million per year—absolutely guaranteed—and would result in better art."

What sort of society is being created by these demands? How distant is this from the direct censorship of anything that fails to conform to the political status quo? Or from the measures introduced in Nazi Germany and Mussolini's fascist Italy to suppress oppositional art?

Those demanding that artists remain silent about Australia's concentration camp-style refugee detention centres and other anti-democratic violations will soon be calling for direct censorship against anyone daring to speak out against militarism and war.

And what happens if the so-called "efficiency dividend" regime is applied across the board to individual artists? Should painters be forced to cut back on art supplies, or writers to produce novels, or poetry, at a faster rate? Should a choreographer or composer be required to use fewer dancers or musicians, or be obligated to organise more performances of their works?

The Turnbull government, with bipartisan support from Labor and the Greens, claims there is no money. This is a lie. A massive \$495 billion military acquisitions program is being carried out over the next decade, to purchase submarines, warships, F-35A strike fighters and a fleet of new battle tanks and other infantry vehicles. Moreover, more than \$500 million has been allocated, as part of the promotion of the centenary of World War I, to funding scores of government-commissioned works and events aimed at fostering militarism and fanning the noxious fumes of nationalism.

Scores of arts colleges, galleries and libraries, not to mention schools, hospitals and other vital social facilities, could be financed and staffed with such resources. And countless regional arts organisations and disability arts programs could also be funded.

Art seeks to cognise life and provide a deeper understanding of the world and society beyond what is immediately revealed in everyday life. That is why, if artists are unable to survive and do their work, then society as a whole suffers—intellectual life is denuded and critical thought compromised.

The development of serious art and the nurturing of those who carry out this work, however, is a complex social process, and, in the 21st century, the necessary conditions cannot be created or sustained by ordinary individuals—i.e., those without wealthy patrons.

State-funding of the arts is essential—and on a far higher level than currently provided by any country in the world—to create the conditions to train and develop those involved in genuinely creative work and as an essential component of the struggle for a genuinely humane society.

Artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians and other cultural workers have sought to fight the cuts over the past two years via fruitless appeals and

protests to government and opposition MPs. But in order to confront the government onslaught, artists and other creative workers need to frankly confront what these measures reveal about the existing social order, what kind of struggle is required and on the basis of what political perspective.

The dangerous undermining of the arts by the Australian government is not a national issue. Nor is it simply the fault of the predilections of individual politicians. Its retrogressive policies, along with the official promotion of xenophobia, ignorance and militarism, are inseparable from the social war being conducted against the working class—the destruction of its jobs, living standards and basic rights—in every country.

In Britain and Europe state-funding of the arts is being eliminated, while the Trump administration plans to destroy what little remains of US government support for the arts. Its targets include the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and it aims to sell off the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

These far-reaching attacks are another measure of the fact that the capitalist socio-economic order, where everything is measured according to its ability to generate profits, has reached an historic impasse. While extraordinary advances have been made in science, technology, and human productivity, which provide the objective conditions for a new and humane social order, the continuation of a society based on private ownership of the means of production and embedded in the system of rival nation states, offers only a dystopian future of social destruction, dictatorship and war.

The democratic right to art and culture has become a revolutionary issue, intimately bound up with the struggle for a new and higher social order. Serious creative and intellectual endeavour has no future under this moribund system.

As Leon Trotsky, revolutionary Marxist and co-leader with Lenin of the 1917 Russian Revolution, explained in 1938, on the eve of World War II: "To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology.

"Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably—as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery—unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character. For these reasons the function of art in our epoch is determined by its relation to the revolution."

Those wanting to fight the cultural vandalism now underway need to be equipped with an understanding of the complex theoretical and political conceptions, based on the historical and scientific socialist perspective of Marxism, that found their highest expression in the October 1917 revolution and in Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. These liberating ideas, which, in the first decades of the 20th century, attracted the most far-sighted artists, writers and intellectuals, provide the only progressive solution to the explosive political and social issues facing humanity today.



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