

Dear Sir / Madam

I applaud the launching of a Senate Inquiry and would like to take this opportunity of submitting my views on the establishment of a National Program for Excellence in the Arts and its impact on the Arts sector.

This initiative has been proposed by Senator Brandis on the basis that he believes that the Australia Council has been reduced to a funding body for “mediocrity”. As a consequence Senator Brandis has decided to withdraw a substantial portion of its funds and establish an alternative body that will be directed from his ministry. The characterisation of “mediocrity” also implies an allegation of either corruption or incompetence. However, no evidence has been presented. I find this unprofessional and demeaning. I have had the opportunity to work at the highest levels in the arts sector internationally, and I have also had both the privilege of working on various arts projects that were funded by the Australia Council, and the opportunity to include the Australia Council as an industry partner in two ARC Linkage Projects. In my experience the professionalism of the Australia Council has never been in doubt and I cannot see any justification for this allegation. It should be withdrawn and an apology issued.

In my view there are three problems that arise from Senator Brandis’s decision.

The first consequence of this proposed National Program for Excellence in the Arts has been the confusion and chaos that has been imposed into the Australia Council. Existing projects such as the ARC projects that I am working on have been severely impaired as our partners in the Australia Council have been distracted and prevented from fulfilling their own roles. It has also blocked any potential for feedback and follow-up research in arts policy. Given that ARC funding programs and procedures are rather protracted the impact of this disruption will be felt for many years to come. The administrative waste that is generated by these changes, and the debilitating impact it will also spawn on small to medium arts companies is immeasurable.

Secondly, the proposal of this new program appears to offend the founding principles of the Australia Council. My understanding of their mission is to foster the development of our own national forms of cultural and artistic expression. This principle is based on the view that we should be producers and innovators in arts and culture, rather than simply importers and performers of the western canon. Such a principle has aesthetic experimentation and collaboration with local talent at its heart. The only means for identifying and evaluating this potential for cultural innovation is through peer assessment. The quality of peer assessment in this country is of a very high level. Most of the people on the peer panels have established an outstanding track record both nationally and internationally. The people involved in this process take the task very seriously. They are faced with difficult challenges: while excellence is the number one priority in the Australia Council’s strategic plan, there is also a strong expectation that equity and experimentation will also be supported. To undermine this process will lead to a reinstatement of a cultural cringe, at a time when the arts sector in our region is becoming more outward facing and more willing to experiment in contemporary practice.

Thirdly, I also fear that this divide and rule policy will create a clientilistic culture of political favorites. Ministers and Governments come and go. However, will the success of one artist or institution with one regime suggest a level of favoritism that not only affects their standing in the wider arts community, but will also impair their chances under a different regime? Perhaps the most corrosive impact of this shift in arts funding procedures will be to undermine the objectivity and integrity of the role of the state.

I reject the smears that have been launched against the Australia Council, I am appalled by the disregard of the existing mechanisms for artistic evaluation and cultural production, and I am unable to see the value of creating an alternate stream of funding, I therefore strongly oppose the introduction of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts.

Yours truly  
Professor Nikos Papastergiadis