

Senate Enquiry into the Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget Decisions on the Arts

In the May 2015 budget it was announced that the government will take \$104.7 million from the Australia Council's funding in order to create a new National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA). This will be run by the Ministry for the Arts under the Arts Minister, Senator Brandis. I am very concerned about serious effect this will have on the Arts, especially in Tasmania, if it goes ahead.

My wife and I are not actors or directors or beneficiaries of Arts funding in any way – we just enjoy going to the theatre. We are lucky that Tasmania has a pool of very talented actors, directors, dancers, musicians, set designers, lighting people and so on who provide high-quality theatre in this State. They are supported by local theatre companies like Blue Cow Theatre, which has an active policy of training young people in these skills.

These artists add greatly to the vitality of our State and add to its reputation as a Centre for the Arts in Australia. And it is not just a matter of providing entertainment to the people of Tasmania and our visitors, important though that is – our playwrights and theatre directors provide an opportunity to tell *our* story – the story of life on this island and stories of life elsewhere from a Tasmanian perspective. No-one else is going to tell these stories so it's important that we tell them ourselves. But we need funding to do this.

It would be nice if the arts could be self-supporting financially, but I doubt if this happens anywhere in the world. It is for this reason that we have the Australia Council for the Arts, which partly funds these productions. Unfortunately, the new guidelines give Senator Brandis the final say in who gets funding for his new NPEA. Given this government's preoccupation with secrecy, it is likely that these funding decisions will be kept secret.

It is widely reported that the arts sectors favoured by Senator Brandis are the elite aspects of Ballet and Opera, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. One of his first acts as Arts Minister was to give \$1 million to the Australian Ballet School, at a time when the rest of the arts sector lost more than \$87 million in funding.

Tasmania does not have an Opera Company or a high-end Ballet Company, so we are unlikely to receive any benefits at all from the NPEA. We will, however, lose badly from the reduction in funding to the Australia Council. We have a number of friends who are actors and otherwise involved in local theatre. They are all very worried that they will lose their jobs in the theatre and that Tasmanian theatre will dry up completely as a result. It is being reported that Tasmania's highly successful Terrapin theatre company, which has brought their world-class puppet theatre to audiences across Tasmania, nationally and internationally may have to close for lack of funding. Finegan Kruckemeyer, one of Tasmania's most successful and talented playwrights with 75 commissioned works performed around the world, says if funding cuts cause small to medium-sized theatre companies to close, he will have to move overseas to earn a living. He believes his situation is representative of many. This would be a great loss to Tasmania.

These cuts would not just affect local theatre. Last night we saw Noni Hazlehurst perform the one-woman play *Mother* at the Theatre Royal in Hobart. It's a powerful piece of theatre about homelessness, domestic violence and people who fall through the cracks in our society, sometimes simply as a result of bad decisions they made. These are all topical and important themes, and we

are lucky to have a show of this calibre in our State. Because my wife and I support the Theatre Royal we were invited to a reception afterwards, attended by Noni Hazlehurst and the play's director, Matt Scholten. At the reception, Matt expressed deep concern about the funding cuts and said if they go through we won't see actors like Noni Hazlehurst or plays like this in our State ever again. It costs a lot to bring shows like this to Tasmania, and because of our small population they are not financially viable without government funding. This would indeed be a great loss.

Senator Brandis apparently made his decision without consulting with the arts sector or the Australia Council so he is probably unaware (or maybe he just doesn't care) of the dreadful implications for many arts workers across the country and the potential to damage the cultural vitality of our country, and in particular our State, for generations to come. I hope the Senate Committee will do what they can to prevent these terrible funding cuts from going ahead.

Mike Severs

17th July 2015