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Comment on the proposed new Australia Council Act

The following response to the review on which the draft act is based will explain itself. As preamble, I would point out that the Australia Council has many times remade itself over the years—and that this has been successfully achieved precisely because the original act was intentional rather than specific in matters of process. The proposed new act, by contrast, is rigid and will soon be outdated. All the proposed reforms of the council can be achieved within the terms of the original act. The most cogent objection to the new act is that it is utterly unnecessary.

There are many other objections, as follows.

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Reviewing the Review of the Australia Council

Rodney Hall

The authors of the promised Australia Council review have now presented their findings to the Federal Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean. Much of the

background material assembled here is well organised and succinctly presented. Many of the issues flagged for attention certainly need addressing. And the suggested budget increase is welcome. But the thrust of the review's three main recommendations is another matter altogether: the politicisation of policy, the corporatisation of the council, and the emasculation of the peer assessment panels.

If put into effect, the fallout will cause shockwaves throughout the arts community.

Since the Australia Council Act of 1973 the organisation has been many times modified and reformed, but the two-tier structure has survived: at one level peer assessment panels headed by a chairperson; and at the other an administrative staff headed by a CEO.

The peers make grant decisions and generate policy—while the staff implement these decisions and manage the finances. Clear and transparent. And this simple structure has the benefit of being vertically integrated from the ground up: the peer panels advising the artform boards—and board chairs having a seat on the Council. Thus, policy has consistently arisen from practice and has seldom lost sight of applicability. That is, until recent times.

For the past few years the Council has been run more like a business than an agency for cultural enrichment. Creeping corporatism is alienating both clients and community. And the obsession with performance indicators has led to staggeringly complex acquittals being required. Yet the review, instead of seeking to repair this rift, proposes severing the vertical integration altogether by abolishing the artform boards and removing their chairpersons from the council. This advice is offered on the pretext that support for new and hybrid artforms is somehow hampered by the categories of art familiar to us all.

This is the tail wagging the dog. The fact is that, no matter how many hybrid arts projects are on offer, ninety percent of submissions still fall into the traditional categories of music, theatre, dance, visual arts and crafts, literature, indigenous arts and community cultural development. These, after all, are the

disciplines taught by our training institutions and they are the main career paths for professional artists.

The review acknowledges that ‘since its inception the Australia Council has played a central role in ensuring the vitality and resilience of the Australian arts sector’. Exactly. But this successful outcome has been the product of the very system they now propose dismantling. Here as elsewhere the substance of the review is at loggerheads with the spin.

The authors claim the Council should ‘maintain the centrality of peer assessment’, yet they recommend replacing the boards with what they call ‘a general stream for grant applications across all artforms.’ This begs the question: how, then, is peer assessment to function? It is no use saying let’s have peers, but let’s not have them in definable categories. When there are no categories how do we recognise them as peers?

So the question is: who will assess this ‘general stream’? Will the panel comprise one sculptor, one poet, one theatre director, perhaps, one musician and a couple of arts opinion-makers? Personally, I’m not convinced that even the most brilliant poet can be relied on to know much about the needs, let’s say, of a young dancer embarking on a career; nor that the sculptor will grasp the technical requirements of composers working with computer software. I know I wouldn’t. Thus, in any such mixed panel, there will probably be only one person qualified to assess a given application. And that person will have unilateral power to make the decision.

This simply will not work. We can be pretty certain it won’t, because it has been tried once before. Under Dr Timothy Pascoe’s leadership it was given a trial for some years. And if anyone could have made it work he could. Yet it failed and the time-honoured system had to be restored.

The proposed change will wipe out peer assessment and substitute a system fraught with the probability of nepotism. If the minister goes along with it the immediate consequence is likely to be a landslide of protests on his desk. The simple fact is that each artform has specific needs. These are best understood by specialist panels. And there has never been a time when the

artform boards did not welcome and seek out collaborations and cross-artform experiments. Mechanisms for doing this are not hard to devise. To blur the Council's clearly defined two-tier functions under the masquerade of a call for increased transparency is either hypocritical, misinformed or plain stupid.

Ministers in the past have had many reasons for gratitude that the arm's-length decisions of the Council have been defended by the Council itself. It's obvious that choices made on qualitative comparisons and based in aesthetic values will be subjective and, therefore, contestable. There's no way out of this. In any kind of creative subsidy there will be misses as well as hits. It's the price we pay for seeking the most adventurous returns on the funds allocated by government.

The model put forward here would inevitably shift decisions from the peers to the staff. It might appear to make good enough sense for an open-and-shut, profit-based business, but not in a context of cultural and subjective values. Staff will always be a force for conservatism, regardless of how good they are. Like every other bureaucracy it is in their interests to maintain the status quo, because they have power and position to protect. They are there on a permanent basis while members of peer panels, by contrast, are traditionally appointed for a single grant round only—a turnover that makes for fair decisions and guards against entrenched influence.

Sadly, much of the review is similarly flawed. Contradictions abound. The authors recommend supporting 'Australian creative arts practice that is recognised nationally and internationally as excellent in its field', when—oops!—haven't they just urged the minister to disregard these fields as outdated?

Among many surprising omissions the most surprising is the lack of any analysis of the present crisis brought on by the digital revolution. For all the exciting technological possibilities open to us, on-line sales, piracy and the undermining of copyright have resulted in creators suffering a crippling loss of income. Finding a solution is a matter of urgency.

Nor is mention made of the demise of many small and medium sized theatre and dance companies, dwindling the prospects for performing artists. Australia is rich in talent but becoming impoverished in opportunities. This is tragic for many young people seeking careers. The upshot is constant pressure on such openings as there are. Let's be clear: there is never enough money to go round. Inevitably most applicants will find themselves turned down.

In commissioning two analysts from the alien world of business and investment to write the review the minister loaded the dice. And this brings us to the political agenda.

One of the Australia Council's great successes has been unbroken bi-partisan support in the parliament. This arm's-length independence was guaranteed in the Australia Council Act on the advice of its founder, Dr Nugget Coombs. The template he established shielded it from party political intervention. Now, in a complete reversal, a mandate is recommended for the minister, 'to ensure that the Council focuses on funding and promoting artistic excellence in all its forms, leaving the primary work of policy development . . . to the department of state'.

That is to say, policy decisions will be dictated by public servants in the minister's department. In a final twist of hypocrisy the review calls for the act itself to be replaced by a new one, 'to preserve the principles of operation at arm's-length from government, and peer-based review of funding decisions'—the very thing it will destroy at a stroke.

Simon Crean would be well-advised to treat this advice with extreme caution.

And bad only gets worse. Under the caption 'Governance' the report endorses the further corporatisation of the Australia Council by firmly placing the CEO at the centre of power, even to being the one who chooses the peer assessors. This corrodes the clear, two-tier structure. It amounts to unprecedented control by the administration, exacerbated by the removal of peers from the council level of decision making.

Much is made, in the review, of defining the arts as industries. This market-driven thinking is, at best, simplistic. The assumption is that the legitimacy of the arts can be reduced to the income they generate. It is all part of the cargo cult of the Western democracies: the blind belief that society and culture are products of the economy—instead of the other way around.

But even this has been tried before. In the days of Donald Horne's chairmanship, during the 1980s, the Council argued for public funding on exactly that basis: the sector's immense financial input to GDP ('exceeding the contribution of the agriculture, forestry & fishing industries', as present review points out). Statistical data was produced, posters printed, and a fullscale campaign mounted. But I can assure the minister that the impact on government, on the press and on public opinion was so slight as to be virtually undetectable.

As to relying on the market as arbiter, the market itself and its collapsing certainties are the cause of massive challenges for the future. Sweeping corporatism has already hijacked our universities and hospitals, not to mention precipitating a global financial crisis with such reckless dishonesty that it wiped off a third of the world's wealth. The naked truth is that corporations put profit before people. The market economy is into job minimalisation. We know this. So, let's not go any farther down that track. Let's preserve what we can of cultural value. Business should mind its own business.

The fact is that the Council is only as good as the talent it fosters. And the returns reaped by the public are the enrichment of our lives and a voice with which we can speak to the future (as Lawson, for example, and Streeton speak to us). A great deal does need to be done to reshape and refocus the Australia Council. But the minister should be warned that the proposed model will destroy more than it delivers.

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