

Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts Submission

To the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for inquiry and report regarding the inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts.

We represent key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts organisations across Australia. Given the changes to the national arts infrastructure as a result of the recent Federal budget, we are writing to urge you to reconsider your decision and to reverse the funding cuts made to the Australia Council for the Arts in the 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 Federal Budgets.

The Australia Council plays a pivotal role in the maintenance and creation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. We are concerned that these cuts to the Australia Council will impact on our sector, particularly the effectiveness of our small to medium arts organisations and those people, especially our youth, who are developing their craft.

It can be easy for policy-makers to overlook questions of culture as a marginal concern in the search for practical outcomes. By contrast, for many Indigenous communities, culture is at the core of community life and their aspirations for a healthy and productive future. Arts and Culture has to be the starting point in any serious efforts to address Indigenous disadvantage with Indigenous people.

Increasingly, agencies with responsibilities for Indigenous health, education, employment and other wellbeing outcomes are realising that arts and culture are a powerful space for working effectively with communities, opening dialogue, engaging participation and working in partnerships to better futures and deliver results in these crucial areas.

The Ministry of the Arts' website states;

Strong cultural identity is fundamental to Indigenous health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Initiatives that strengthen Indigenous culture are therefore essential to Closing the Gap, which is a commitment by all Australian governments to work together to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in particular, to provide a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

There is ample evidence to support the importance of art in Aboriginal communities. It is not only a means of transfer of information but also an important source of self-esteem, energy, enthusiasm pride and hope.

From anonymous artefact makers whose works were collected by museums and anthropologists to a serious acceptance by the world's art industry, the rise of contemporary Indigenous arts is a modern art movement of enormous significance to Australia.

The Indigenous arts sector is a major economic contributor to the arts economy and responsible for some of Australia's most valuable and important works of art. In many

of our communities, income from arts and cultural activities is the main source of income.

The prominence of Indigenous art is due in part to the motivation and considerable effort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, who have played a major role in introducing both Australia and the rest of the world to our cultures. Art has been the most effective tool for building relationships and awareness between Indigenous people and the wider community.

Arts Nation; an arts overview of Australian Arts published by the Australia Council for in March, 2015 stated that;

- *737,000 international tourists engaged with Indigenous arts activities in 2013–14. In 2013–14 more international tourists in Australia took part in Indigenous arts activities than went to wineries or organised sport. The most popular activities were viewing an Indigenous art, craft or cultural display and attending a dance or theatre performance.*
- *\$53 MILLION in art sales generated by remote Indigenous arts centres between 2008 and 2012*
- *\$30 MILLION paid to remote Indigenous artists*
- *28% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people creatively participate in Indigenous arts. As an expression of culture, arts are an important part of daily life for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. In 2013 over one in four participated creatively in Indigenous arts activities such as writing, telling stories, Indigenous arts and crafts, music, dance or theatre.*
- *92% of Australians agree that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia's culture.*
- *64% of Australians have a strong or growing interest in Indigenous arts. Only 24% of that desire is served by work available.*
- *24% of Australians attended Indigenous arts in the previous year*
- *Almost all Australians agree that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia's culture and two in three Australians have a strong or growing interest in Indigenous arts. While only around one in four engaged with Indigenous arts in 2013, this is up from 17% in 2009.*
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are proportionally more likely to be nominated for a major Australian art award or participate in an international arts event.*

The Overview also says;

'Cultural knowledge leads to jobs and income based on artistic activity, connections to country and cultural experiences. Cultural tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing tourism markets. Australia is uniquely placed as home to the world's oldest continuous living culture.'

The decision to cut funds from the Australia Council to create a second arts funding organisation, the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) will put at risk our artists, particularly those beginning their careers and those trying to maintain their careers. It will also impact on our small to medium arts organisations.

The Peer Assessment process utilised by the Australia Council has a focus on art as the major element of a submission. Economic viability is also assessed but it is the creation of art that is important. This allows for all Australians, regardless of economic or cultural background, to access support for their art. The Peer assessment process has been developed from extensive consultations with artists and the arts sector over many years and ensures that all areas of art are represented in the decision making process.

The role of Australia Council is to develop and nurture the arts. The focus of the NPEA would see support to artists whose work is already 'excellent' and is already achieving major outcomes. This is the opposite of the Australia Council for the Arts which is about developing and fostering 'excellence' not simply awarding it. The definition of 'Excellence' is not clear in the NPEA guidelines. It is also not clear on who will make the decision on successful applications.

Indigenous arts has had incredible success nationally and internationally. Since 1988 there have been more than 200 Australian Indigenous visual art exhibitions staged around the world from New York to China and from New Zealand to Finland. The Western Desert Art movement is seen as one of the most significant art movements of the 20th century. Apart from the funding cuts to the Australia Council, changes to the Federal funding under the Indigenous Arts, Languages and Repatriation programs will also have an impact on the arts sector. The targeted 'invitation only' approach to visual arts funding will certainly affect some small communities where arts is the major and sometimes the only industry.

In the last decade, Indigenous writers have won major literature awards including The Prime Minister's Literary Award, The Vogel Award, the Commonwealth Literary regional prize and the Miles Franklin Award. The NPEA makes no mention of Literature in its eligibility guidelines. Although the new National Book Council has important objectives which will benefit writers, there seems to be more of a focus on the publishing/business industry. The shifting of significant funding away from Australia Council and the timing of the establishment of the Book Council by the Ministry for the Arts, demonstrates a commitment to the support of the publishing industry as a business, rather than a continued focus on supporting writing as an artform. Writers are often the least empowered and financially rewarded in the sector but without them there is no industry!

Our performing arts have also excelled. Theatre and dance productions toured extensively nationally and overseas and received wide acclaim. Many of these productions grew from community development activities.

Within this abundant talent there are huge opportunities to have a more sustained and engaged national and international audience and market penetration. Unfortunately, Bangarra Theatre is the only Aboriginal arts organisation in the Major Performing Arts Sector and the only one that appears to be secure under your proposed National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) program. We support Bangarra fully and believe they deserve to be a recognised major performing arts

organisation. However, they rely on the talent of emerging performers and this talent pool could be at risk if the Australia Council does not have adequate funding.

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are involved in a 'hybrid economy'. This accommodates state, customary and market activities. It is an economy that provides livelihoods rather than simply jobs. Some successful hybrid economies include cultural tourism, the production of bush foods, the management of natural resources and the creation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

We believe that a greater understanding is essential for our arts sector to fulfil our potential to provide social, cultural and economic benefits to our communities and welcome any changes that might enhance Indigenous artistic and cultural practices and not diminish it.

The Indigenous arts sector believes arts and culture cannot be separated. Our culture governs our artistic practice. Our communities determine excellence based on this model. We do not want our art to be merely entertainment but as a social enterprise that has the capacity to make change.

Funding cuts to the Australia Council will affect artistic practice and creativity for the majority of artists and arts organisations who rely on support from the Australia Council. All Australians interact with art in their lives and all art relies on emerging artists and small to medium arts organisations to provide the talent pools. Without adequate funding this level of the art industry will be at risk. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art will be at risk as a result of this.

We urge you to reconsider the funding cuts and to review your policies and guidelines to ensure that all Australians can enjoy art. We also urge the Ministry of Arts to develop dialogue with Aboriginal artists and the Indigenous arts sector so that a clear understanding of why we practice art and its importance in our communities is acknowledged and recognised in your policies.

Yours sincerely

Blak Dance
Cairns Indigenous Art Fair
AbMusic
First Nations Australia Writers Network
Indigenous Art Centre Alliance
Yirra Yaakin Theatre
The Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists
Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC)
Ilbijerri Theatre Company
Salt Water Fresh Water Arts Alliance
Mooghlin Aboriginal Theatre
Gadigal Information Service
Tandanya