

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts

My name is Zelda Grimshaw. I am 49 years of age, and I live in Cairns, Queensland. I have been a practicing performing artist for thirty years, in the fields of music and theatre. I have worked across Australia, Africa, Asia and Europe, and have enjoyed many collaborations with artists from within Australia and abroad. Much of my arts practice has been at 'grass roots' level, where most of the population live and experience arts and culture – in small theatres, cafes and pubs, at community festivals, arts and music festivals, in church halls, footy fields and backyards.

While I have never personally received Australia Council funding, many of the fruitful, socially engaged projects I have participated in have been enabled by the support of state and federal government funding streams. These projects have no claim to 'artistic excellence' in the sense of the MSO or Opera Australia. Yet these are the sorts of projects that drive cultural and social change, by connecting with communities in an inclusive arts practice, by bringing divergent human experiences together in the peaceful zone that is arts expression, and by resolving social tensions and pain through the media of song, dance, poetry, and drama: acting together.

I am deeply concerned that the present government seems not to recognize the immense value that grass roots arts practitioners offer to our society. One of the merits of Australian arts funding models of the last four decades has been an emphasis on inclusiveness and community benefit, alongside criteria of 'quality' and technical ability. In dollar value, Australian artists return \$8 for every funding dollar they receive – a sensible investment in purely economic terms. What is less quantifiable, however, is the social value that is gained from the work that artists do. Social cohesion, the affirmation of diverse identities, the airing and healing of historical wounds – these are areas where our small and independent artists, our community or grass roots practitioners, offer immeasurable benefit to our society. Opera Australia and the MSO may be not perfect, but these companies do not touch most people's lives in the way that our thriving independent sector can.

One of the marks of an open and democratic society is public support for freedom of expression, including a diverse, vibrant and independent arts sector. The changes in the national budgets of 2014 and 2015, enabling a Ministerial decision to be brought to bear on arts funding, are intolerable. Without wanting to indulge in hyperbole, it must be said that taking control of artistic and cultural production is always a first step of totalitarian regimes. Ministerial control of arts funding has no place in Australia, or anywhere.

Our writers, our dancers, our musicians and painters and theatre makers, will always be competing for a limited pool of government funding – such is our life.

Many of us teach in our professions, or work in other professions, to support our arts practice. Most of us choose to be poor so that we can continue our artistic work. We do this because we are dedicated, driven, inspired. We work because we feel a social responsibility to make work that is uplifting or challenging, revealing or soothing, in short, that is socially relevant. Every now and then, we are able to make work in a fully supported environment, because of a successful grant application.

The independence and vitality of our arts practitioners will be severely damaged by the 2014 and 2015 budget decisions on the arts. Federal arts funding in a democratic nation should be administered by a fully independent body, staffed by people with relevant skills and experience – such as the Australia Council. Ministerial control of arts funding will be a disastrous step for the arts, and for our democracy.

Thank you for your consideration,

Zelda K.J. Grimshaw