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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Participants in the Rio Carnival
Community Festival, Cairns funded by Arts Qld

16 July 2015

**RE: Senate Inquiry investigating the impact of the 2014 and 2015
Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts**

My Concern

The impact of the decision to reduce the Australia Council's budget and relocate it to the Minister of the Arts Department has effectively put a halt to a whole grant round (June round and EOI for Core infrastructure funds) and many projects I am involved in. Above all it was the suddenness in which the decision was enacted that had the biggest impact, not allowing groups and organisations to adjust their planning and consider other options.

I work with various community groups and arts organisations that were poised ready to apply to the Australia Council of the Arts and their various boards and Festivals Australia.

I have a number of questions I would like to ask the government that made this decision and I would also like to share with you a number of stories on behalf of real people that live every day lives, some of them with more challenges than many of us will ever know.

MY BACKGROUND

I have always worked in the arts and cultural sector. Since graduating with a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Music and Theatre, I have worked continuously as an Arts and Community Development practitioner.

Over 25 years in the game you start to observe the swings and slides of political flavor, community favour and personal commitment! There are times that despite everything, a community-led project persists beyond all set backs, lack of funding, and the twists and turns of community involvement.

There are times that decision-makers put a series of events into place and your world changes forever. Some of these times are great, and others impact in devastating, heart-wrenching ways that can not be evaluated or documented. Too personal to even record. So many times I know of people that have simply walked away from being creative and contributing to the cultural fabric of our communities, because it just too difficult to do it without the support of government funding.

I have read through the NPEA guidelines and though there are certain key works included and it seems to be mostly replicating the existing Australia Council policy framework as released in their new strategic plan last year

QUESTION: how will community cultural development be factored into the NPEA guidelines?
Does the Ministry for the Arts value this aspect of development and pathways for community?

FUNDED PROJECTS THROUGHOUT MY CAREER

My own career has had many injections of funding and investment by business, government, partners and participants. I am eternally grateful to the thousands upon thousands of people that have been audiences, participants, arts workers, supporters of the 38 productions I have been involved with. From “**Allegro**” with 200 performers aged 5-89, the 3,500 participants in the **Lantern Parade for Cairns Festival** that made things and left their comfort zones. The play written to tour schools called “**No Shame**” that performed to an estimated 100,000 people over 8 years. Ten years later this production is getting a remount – Jimmy lives again!!!

Federal government has funded work I have been involved in, no less than 8 times, all with community outcomes and each with their unique creativity and specific appeal. Funded projects have been the life-blood of my income and allowed me to facilitate community involvement at all levels. Most recently I have been the Project Manager of a Choir for people that have experienced homelessness and disadvantage. “**Song Connection**” has had a direct impact on approximately 70 people, some of which have gone on to progress their opportunities and continue to develop as musicians. Stories like the woman who was a recluse for 18 years and had self taught 5 instruments – gets to perform a solo for the first time in her life, to an audience over 8 night season. Then the woman in a cycle of abuse, now mentoring others to continue with music. The other member who lives with Bipolar, had been shy, now attends multiple clubs and wins karaoke comps a lot!!!!

This is not to say that I have not always understood the competitive nature of applying for federal arts grant. I see it as “aspirational” and something to goal for. Once I know a project has significant impact on a community and contributes to the national arts agenda, then I understand a project to be ready for Australia Council funding. The fact that it has become increasingly difficult to achieve a grant is more testimony to the constant eroding of the arts budget and the importance put on it to create a cohesive community. I feel that the Minister for the Arts would have done better to;

1. Look for new funding for the NPEA
2. Entice the “corporates” to sponsor this program and find his own endowment partnerships to fund his vision (role-modeling)
3. Work with the Australia Council during their strategic planning process to ensure that the funds covered what he was visioning.

QUESTION: Community connectivity, social inclusion and social capital are integral to the livability of our communities. Will there be opportunities in the Ministry for the Arts acknowledge the value of Wellbeing, health and the Arts as “excellent”?

Who determines what is “excellent” and what is not?

WORK ENVIRONMENTS

As a professional Arts Practitioner, I have worked in various capacities in a variety of work environments from government, education, business and community. I have been in positions where I have been primarily responsible for developing policy and procedures, expanding professional and community networks. I have also been integral in many partnerships with stakeholders and community in the area of community engagement particularly for festivals and events.

I have a demonstrated knowledge of arts and culture in contemporary Australian community setting, developing online resources and networks, training and facilitating forums. Through my deep understanding and active experience in community cultural development practice and managing many projects and community festivals over twenty years, I have gained;

- a commitment to diverse cultural practices and protocols,
- skills in facilitating community consultation and participatory expression,
- the ability to undertake collaborative project design with all levels of stake holders,
- a broad network with connections to grass roots community through to politicians,
- access to skills and resources.

As a Festivals Practitioner I have worked in the national context and regularly employed at events such as WOMADelaide, Woodford Folk Festival, Cairns Festival, the Australia Performing Arts Market, Cairns Writers and Cairns Buskers Festival and thousands of community based events across Australia. From Site Manager to Volunteer Manager, Project Manager to Participant Liaison, I have worked in various roles from training and mentor to project and event managers and their committees throughout Adelaide and regional Queensland and the Torres Strait.

STATEMENT: Many of these projects take years of developing relationships, growing concepts from a spark of an idea and then attracting resources to enable the project. With the immediacy in which the budget decision of the Minister was enacted, planning was impacted. The insecurity this caused has had a longer term affect on communities and the relationships.

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS OF BUDGET DECISION

I can tell you that in my world the decision had instant impact. I have found myself explaining to many members of the community what it may mean. I have read the documentation, the proposed guidelines to the NPEA and I am hopeful/keen/prepared to hear the good things that will come about from this decision. However, in the meantime, until I can be convinced that this decisions were made with the industry in mind, the community we engage with at the centre of the decision, and a vision to take the industry forward, I fear the fall out.

- It is not only that there are five applications across three projects that now can not be submitted.
- It is not the insult that I feel as an arts practitioner that had been involved in the review of Australia Council and the excitement I felt for the announced changes.
- It's not even the insecurity of knowing whether the community projects I work on and feel pride in the achievements, will actually fit the criteria of the NPEA program and therefore limit the funding opportunities we have.
- Or the feeling that there should be more money for the Arts – not less

Regardless of all these points, the overriding impact of this decision has been the ramification that is yet to be evaluated. That there is no way to quantify the impact of the negative message gone to the community that says “**unless you are excellent and have a wide appeal and great demand**” – you don't count.

At a time with disasters, increasing mental health, high unemployment and the consequential crime and misconduct – now is the time to be increasing access to arts and cultural opportunities. Arts are paramount to well-being and connectivity with community that is document to ensure reliance at time of nature and personal disasters. This is not the time to abandon them.

Melissa Robertson

Community Cultural Development Practitioner