

To The Senate Inquiry into recent budget cuts in the arts,

I am writing to express great concern about the changes to arts funding arrangements contained in the last Federal Budget released in May 2015.

I am a freelance playwright who lives in Sydney I am dismayed by the huge damage this policy will cause to the livelihood of individual artists like me as well as the impact it will have the diminishing the evolution of Australian culture.

Personally, I have spent the last fifteen years building expertise as a playwright. Writing for the theatre it is not a job that pays well but I am committed to my practice because I believe I am playing an important role in helping people in our society come to understand the way our culture is evolving.

I have had over 60 productions of my plays in Australia and 10 plays published both here and in the UK. I have just returned from six months in The USA after being selected as the Inaugural Professional Playwrights Fulbright Scholar. I was proud to represent Australia in an international context. During this prestigious scholarship my plays were read in public in several cities and produced in San Francisco, Alaska and Kansas. I spoke with pride about a flourishing arts community in Australia and the impact art has had on affecting social change in areas such as reconciliation and celebrating multiculturalism.

Without the Australia Council's support I would never have had the support to become a playwright. This organisation have supported me to write plays, develop skills as an artist and share my skills with younger generations. I know so many of my amazing peers who make rich contribution to Australia's important cultural life would not be practicing artists if it wasn't for The Australia Council either.

I am very successful in my field but still I really struggle to afford to live in a share house in Sydney. My income is well below the average. Much of my income over the past ten years has come from the support of The Australia Council. Without this support I will not be would certainly not have become a successful theatre writer who is now having work produced on stages in several countries, allowing a positive representation of Australian culture to reach the world.

In the past 8 years, more than 50% of my income has come either directly through project funding through The Australia Council or through projects which have been funded by small to medium companies. I was recently unable to apply for funding in the June round and like many of my peers I am now contemplating how I will support myself in 2017.

At 43 years of age, with international recognition as playwright and with 6 years of tertiary education, it seems a very unfortunate thing to be considering. I feel sad, under-valued and disillusioned. I need to tell you that this is an extremely stressful time for me and many of my peers. So many of Australia's most respected artists already live on a very small income. It feels so demeaning to be begging for the reinstatement of such a tiny amount in the context of other budget spending. But it is not just about money either, it is about recognising the arts and their importance to a culture on so many levels

Many artists in other countries are envious of the Australian government's support of a diverse range of artists through the Australia Council. In the past month or so I have received so many letters from peers abroad to say that they are shocked by the governments' slashes. And while Australian artists do not receive very much philanthropic support compared to other nations there is international recognition that the only way the arts will ever garner such support is if governments acknowledge and respect the contribution the arts and artists make to a nations fabric, identity and sense of well-being. In the past Australia has been so widely recognised so widely for its achievements in the arts. With the current funding cuts this future does not look possible since excellence is something that begins somewhere small and needs nurturing and support.

I am particularly concerned that the reduction in Australia Council funding will not only impact badly on individual artists but also the small to medium arts organisations which are the engine room for supporting Australian innovative contemporary arts practice. This will result in a wide loss of employment for the many people who work in these private and public arts small businesses.

The arts makes a substantial contribution both to the economy and the social and cultural well being of the community. I believe this is now in considerable jeopardy.

I was brought up to believe in fairness. I know that the concept of fairness is still something most Australians value regardless of their political persuasion.

It is my view that The Australia Council represents fairness in the arts. And now the Australia Council's budget has been slashed leaving many artists without future income and future generations without access to invigorating art and the wide benefits it brings.

At the moment there is still some clarification required. However in particular I seek answers to the following questions:

-on the basis of what evidence is the change to management of the Government's arts funding being proposed?

-how can the Arts Minister guarantee that the programs now to be managed by the Ministry for the Arts will adhere to the principles of funding at arms' length from government and peer assessment?

-to reverse diminishing levels of arts funding at both federal and state government levels for the visual arts sector, what new funds will be found to support the excellent arts activity that currently is not able to be funded under existing programs?

-why establish a new parallel funding program which will be a duplication of existing arrangements and a waste of the tax payers' money which has until now, been used to provide grants to the arts?

-how does the Minister intend to redress the economic instability of the majority of arts organisations, caused by the suspension of the Australia Council's 6 year funding program?

Australia needs to have a rich and varied culture where artists are valued and paid for their contribution to our evolving society. The arts inspire us ask questions about who we are and what we are doing. They help us to understand ourselves and those around us and they connect us to our imaginations and bring us joy.

The Australia Council support a huge range of exciting art forms and allow funding through peer assessment which is not only the fairest system I can think of, it is also the envy of artists in many other parts of the world.

This is very different from an assessment of excellence made by one minister.

Through this senate Inquiry into these budget cuts and I urge you to consider the fair role The Australia Council plays in bringing arts to Australians and Australian art to the world and the deep impact these cuts will have to individual artists as well as our evolving culture.

I ask that you urgently intervene to reverse the Arts Budget decision.

Yours faithfully,

Lachlan Philpott

writer, teacher and dog person

Chair Playwrights' Committee Australian Writers Guild

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