

Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100 Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600
Australia

Submission to the Committee

Re: Australia Council Bill 2013

While the restructure of the Australia Council aims to revitalise the national funding body, we are concerned that it will actually achieve the opposite result – removing artists from the decision making process and handing responsibility to the Executive.

The Australia Council has fostered a vibrant arts practice since it was established in the early 1970s. We believe its outstanding success is largely due to the principles embodied in the Artform Boards. These are:

- Peer Assessment, that is, artists making decisions about support for the arts.
- Arms length funding from the Government. Both are acknowledged by the Review as central to the role of the Australia Council.

The current structure allows for the vertical integration of information. Members of the arts community apply to the Artform Boards for support. Board members and the panels make decisions about the distribution of subsidy. Board Chairs present this information to the Council for approval. This, in turn, enables an informed Council to advise the Federal Government.

Under the restructure of the Australia Council, the Artform Boards will be abolished and the Council will become a conventional skills based Governing Board with no artist members. The Governing Board will be removed from direct representation from the arts community which will greatly reduce the Board's ability to represent the arts.

The Loss of Peer Assessment

While the Federal Government has made a commitment to Peer Assessment, the proposed changes to the Australia Council put this principle in jeopardy. This is due to the removal of continuity in the appointment of artists thereby diminishing opportunities to develop a national overview for each artform. Under the restructure, artists will be appointed for one year instead of 3 or 4 years. **This does not allow sufficient time for artists to develop policy out of the practice of the arts and opportunities to develop new programs to meet emerging needs in the arts will be lost. Peer Assessment will exist in name only.**

Pool of Peers

Under the restructure a new funding model will be introduced, inviting a general stream of grant applications across all artforms through out the year. Peers will be appointed on a possible one-off basis to assess applications. Without the benefit of knowledge acquired over a period of time, peers will lack an understanding of the context of individual artforms making it difficult to identify emerging and community artists, new developments or experimental work which is necessary if the regeneration of the arts is to occur. Instead they are likely to support the successful and high profile arts organisations and individuals perpetuating the status quo. It should be noted that all year applications with the Pool of Peers model will be expensive, difficult to administer and likely to increase the hostility from many rejected applicants.

Lines of Communication

Under the restructure, decision making will be distributed through out the Australia Council and the Office for the Arts, on what appears to be an arbitrary basis.

- The Office for the Arts will be responsible for policy development and programs supporting broad access to the arts leaving the Australia Council to support excellence (weakening the principle of Arms Length Decision Making).

- Decisions about grants over \$100,000 will be made by the executive and the Governing Board. As the budgets of most performing arts companies exceed \$100,000, the Music Dance and Theatre panels are likely to be emasculated. Presumably peers cannot be trusted to make decisions about the arts which involve grants over \$100,000!
- The Executive will appoint the Pool of Peers, set the criteria and process the grants. This model passes control of decision making about the arts to the Executive by default. (Originally the Artform Boards appointed the panels of peers on the basis of need). Under the re-structure there appears to be little coordination and neither are there clear lines of communication between the different levels of Council and the Office for the Arts. This is likely to lead to ad hoc decisions and confusion in the delivery of arts support, devaluing the process and creating a cynical arts community.

Australia Council Reform

There is a need to reform the Australia Council, particularly the Artform Boards.

A major reduction of resources and funding has reduced the ability of the Artform Boards to provide creative support to the arts. Important areas of responsibility have been removed from the Boards such as key organisations and Major Performing Arts Organisations. The former should be returned to the Boards and the latter reorganised so that the relevant Artform Boards are represented on the Boards of the Major Performing Arts Organisations. The Artform Boards need to be diversified to include new artforms such as multi arts and digital art. They should be re-built and strict funding guidelines and criteria introduced such as collaboration between the Boards and with the public and private sector. Board representation on Council is important, and to avoid a conflict of interest, Board Chairs should be excluded when the division of the annual budget is made.

Conclusion

The restructure of the Australia Council centralises the decision making with the Executive. Policy will be directed from above rather than responding to the needs of the arts. The arts community will be marginalized.

Rather than passing this flawed Bill, the Australia Council should be asked to advise on a preferred restructure –drawing widely on former artist members, staff and arts experts in the field.

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