

# Chapter 4

## Catalyst

4.1 The minister's announcement of further revised changes to arts funding on 20 November 2015 came only days before the finalisation of the committee's report. While the committee had the opportunity to question the ministry about the changes at its already-scheduled 23 November hearing, the committee was unable to hear directly from other stakeholders, including the arts community, about their views on the changes. The committee did, however, take note of public statements made following the minister's announcement.

4.2 In a media release dated 20 November, the Australia Council welcomed the return of \$8 million per year, saying this would 'partially address' the impact of the previous budget cuts.<sup>1</sup>

4.3 The Council stated that \$7 million of those funds would be reinvested into its core grants program, allowing it to increase the annual grants from \$12 million to \$19 million in 2015-16 (and \$18 million per year thereafter), distributed in three rather than two grants rounds across the year— compared to the four grants rounds and \$26 million planned prior to the 2015 Budget.<sup>2</sup>

4.4 The remaining \$1 million per year would be directed back into the Council's 'strategic projects': the Australia Council stated that this would allow it to 'deliver a small number of our suspended activities', citing national and international audience and market development, and development support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. The Council acknowledged that funding for this work remained reduced by half, noting that it was engaging in enhanced research and advocacy toward 'leveraging new investment in Australian arts'.<sup>3</sup>

4.5 The Australia Council added that the restored funding would allow it to stabilise the allocation to the new four-year program of core funding for organisations at \$22 million.<sup>4</sup>

4.6 The ministry told the committee that the figure of \$8 million returned to the Australia Council was identified by the Council itself in consultations with the

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1 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Australia Council funding update', Media Statement, 20 November 2015.

2 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Australia Council funding update', Media Statement, 20 November 2015.

3 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Australia Council funding update', Media Statement, 20 November 2015.

4 Australia Council for the Arts, 'Australia Council funding update', Media Statement, 20 November 2015.

government, as 'the amount...that they considered would enable them to address the shortfall of the issue with the small to medium arts companies'.<sup>5</sup>

4.7 Some arts organisations responded publicly to the minister's announcement and the Catalyst fund guidelines immediately following their release. The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) expressed 'very mixed feelings', saying that it was 'relieved that the minister is prepared to go some way towards alleviating the havoc caused by the original decision of his predecessor', but that the Catalyst program 'is still being created at the expense of ensuring the survival of organisations that are the engine room for developing and presenting new Australian work'. NAVA said it would continue to advocate for 'a much more considered strategy' with funding at the level identified by the 2012 Australia Council review.<sup>6</sup>

4.8 The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) welcomed the partial reversal of the previous Budget decisions, and the 'willingness of the new Arts Minister Mitch Fifield to consult with the sector'. It was of the view, however, that more information was required about how the Catalyst fund would operate 'to allay concerns about key funding decisions coming out of the office of the Arts Minister'. The MEAA urged the government 'not to close the door on fully restoring funding to the Australia Council and to Screen Australia'.<sup>7</sup>

4.9 Initial responses from some arts commentators experts were also mixed, welcoming elements of the new arrangements, such as Catalyst's increased openness to small and medium organisations,<sup>8</sup> but most ultimately assessed them as falling short of the revision needed to restore sustainability to the arts sector. Associate Professor Joanna Mendelssohn of UNSW noted the importance of using the restored Australia Council funds to support individual practitioners, who had been the 'main victims' of the original cuts.<sup>9</sup>

4.10 Dr Stuart Glover, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland, expressed the view that Catalyst did not remedy the problems of the NPEA, 'but really just sweeps up the mess into a slightly neater pile'. Dr Glover welcomed the apparent openness of the Catalyst fund to writing and publishing

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5 Ms Sally Basser, Executive Director, Ministry of the Arts, *Committee Hansard*, 23 November 2015, pp 7, 13.

6 Tamara Winikoff, 'NAVA responds to Arts Minister's decision on NPEA', Media Release, 20 November 2015, at <https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2015/nava-responds-arts-ministers-decision-npea/> (accessed 24 November 2015).

7 Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, 'Arts funding changes a good first step—but more needed', Media Release, 20 November 2015.

8 Deborah Stone, 'Is it over? How protest killed the NPEA', *ArtsHub Australia*, 19 November 2015, at <http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/public-policy/deborah-stone/is-it-over-how-protest-killed-the-npea-249905> (accessed 24 November 2015); Matthew Westwood, 'Fifield tweaks recognise Australia Council's pain', *The Australian*, 20 November 2015, p. 16.

9 'Out with the NPEA, in with Catalyst: expert response', *The Conversation*, 20 November 2015, at <https://theconversation.com/out-with-the-npea-in-with-catalyst-expert-response-51026> (accessed 24 November 2015).

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organisations, unlike the NPEA, but lamented that the literary sector would remain underfunded and 'an afterthought' following the budget cuts.<sup>10</sup>

4.11 Professor Julian Meyrick of Flinders University assessed that:

Catalyst still means unnecessary pain for the sector, but less of it...if Catalyst works, it will be duplicating the role of the Australia Council. If it doesn't, it will be undermining it.<sup>11</sup>

4.12 In its evidence to the committee, the ministry emphasised that the Catalyst program would focus on organisations which may have found it difficult to compete for Australia Council grants, such as local government arts organisations, museums and galleries.<sup>12</sup> The ministry assured the committee that substantive changes had been made from the NPEA to the new Catalyst fund in response to the public feedback on the draft NPEA guidelines, providing the committee with a table which outlined and explained the key changes. The analysis provided by the ministry is at Appendix 4.

4.13 In response to the committee's questions about how Catalyst would fulfil its stated priority on small and medium organisations, the ministry said that the assessment process would seek to determine a balance of funding:

That will be through the assessment process, and looking at the representation and balance. We will be looking at the range of balance through a number of areas, looking at geographical diversity and looking at small, medium, large organisations. We will be looking at a range of different art forms. All of that will be part of the overarching assessment process, and trying to get that balance.<sup>13</sup>

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10 'Out with the NPEA, in with Catalyst: expert response', *The Conversation*, 20 November 2015, at <https://theconversation.com/out-with-the-npea-in-with-catalyst-expert-response-51026> (accessed 24 November 2015).

11 'Out with the NPEA, in with Catalyst: expert response', *The Conversation*, 20 November 2015, at <https://theconversation.com/out-with-the-npea-in-with-catalyst-expert-response-51026> (accessed 24 November 2015).

12 Ms Sally Basser, Executive Director, Ministry of the Arts, *Committee Hansard*, 23 November 2015, pp 1-2, 20-21. See also Ministry for the Arts, answer to question on notice (Question 3) from the committee's 23 November 2015 public hearing, received 26 November 2015.

13 Ms Sally Basser, Executive Director, Ministry of the Arts, *Committee Hansard*, 23 November 2015, p. 4.

