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A minister with arts credentials

Simon Crean has high ambitions for the arts and their administration in his new role, writes **Robin Usher**.

NEW federal Arts Minister Simon Crean was a typical rock'n'roll teenager growing up in the '60s. "I had a lot of rock music albums and in those days that was the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Yardbirds," he says.

Later his interest included the Doors. But unlike his predecessor, Midnight Oils frontman Peter Garrett, his taste continued to evolve under the strong urging of his mother to include classical music on his record player.

"She was worried about my development and wanted me to play three classical music records for every rock group."

Showing an early indication of his negotiating skills, the young Crean reached an agreement about an equal share of both. He is now a strong admirer of classical music, especially by Tchaikovsky, and of performances by the Australian Ballet and Opera Australia, which is another big difference from Garrett.

"I have eclectic tastes," he says, pointing to his attendance at the Tamworth country music festival and the paintings by Fred Williams and Rover Thomas hanging in his Canberra offices.

He and his wife are passionate about attending live performances and recently have seen the Australian Ballet's performance of *The Nutcracker* and the Cuban Ballet at the Brisbane Festival.

He is due to have his first meeting with Opera Australia's CEO, Adrian Collette, in Sydney next week, but the two are already well acquainted because of Crean's interest in the art form. The minister's attraction to the so-called heritage arts is also apparent from his decision to appoint Helen O'Neill, former executive director of the lobbying organisation, the Australian Major Performing Arts Group, as his arts adviser.

His eclecticism is apparent from his recent commitments: last week's opening of the new \$107 million wing at Canberra's National Gallery of Australia for indigenous art, the two AFL grand finals and, after the second, the opening of the musical, *Hairspray*.

His credentials for the job are obvious, which is why senior Labor Party members in Victoria lobbied for him to replace Garrett.

Crean says he is unaware of the lobbying, but says he was happy to be offered the post by Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The ministry has now been made part of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, following the Victorian model. This is likely to reflect the influence of the department's head, Terry Moran, who moved to Canberra from Melbourne's bureaucracy to work with the new Labor government in 2007.

Kevin Rudd was criticised when he was leader for showing little interest in the arts, but Crean says it is a good sign that the ministry is now part of the Prime Minister's extended departments, even if she has shown little interest so far.

"I'm sure she will get along to see some things when she has time," he says. "It's important for arts to be in the PM's portfolio."

He is encouraging MPs who approached him about forming a group of arts friends because he says it can only lead to greater engagement with the arts.

He says a healthy creative climate is fundamental to Australia's economic future. "Creativity will have an economic spin-off as we lift the nation's productivity."

The arts were an important part of Brand Australia that Crean established when he was trade minister because of the role they play in developing citizenry, self-confidence, tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

His priority is to produce a cultural policy and to consider the push for a new body to replace the Australia Council that would be better equipped to deal with the

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SIMON CREAN



contemporary arts scene.

"I think the council has done a good job but I don't know where we go to from here," he says. "I'm open to discussions."

He is also prepared to try to get the efficiency dividend lifted that the government imposed on the council, although he warns that this will be determined by the overall budget position.

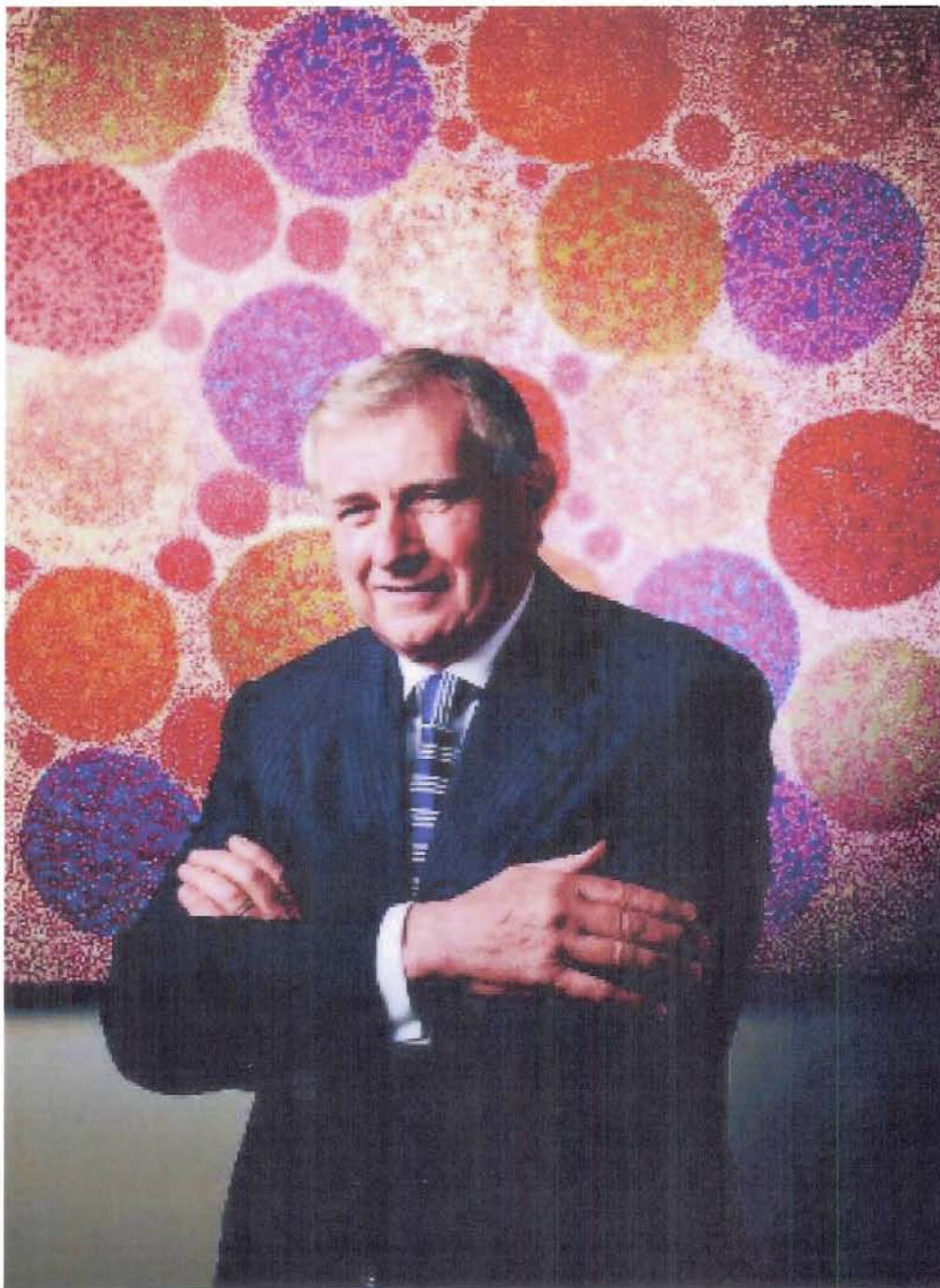
Crean's other big portfolio is regional development and he is keen to get arts into the regions. "I think regional focus includes tapping into the artistic potential through educational facilities such as TAFEs, universities or schools."

He says the regions have acquired "highly significant auditoriums" through the education building program. "The physical

infrastructure has been substantially enhanced."

He says the proposed mining tax will lead to \$573 million being available for regional infrastructure.

He also wants the new broadband network to be used for engagement with the arts. "It would be ideal to teach creative skills and provide access to leading artists."



Simon Crean has eclectic tastes and enthusiasm for raising the importance of the arts.
Picture: Rodger Cummins