

A Response to Current Crisis

by David McMicken AM - Artistic Co-Director Tracks Dance Company
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- **2014** - Australian Arts Organisations in the small to medium sector across Australia were invited to submit to the Australia Council for the Arts¹ in 2015 for 6-year funding
- **2015 May** - George Brandis' budget announcement blindsided the arts community announcing taking \$100m from the Australia Council to establish the National Arts Excellence Program - Catalyst with the Minister making direct grants. (The ALP called it: a ministerial Slush Fund Minister Brandis says that artists should pay more attention to popular tastes, and take money from potential benefactors regardless of the politics, or be defunded. Speaking on a panel chaired by Michael Cathcart (host of ABC Radio National's Books and Arts Daily) at the Regional Arts Australia Summit in Karlgoorlie, Minister Brandis said: "*I am firmly of the view that the way to approach arts policy is not to ask yourself how the arts help other areas of the economy.*"
- **2014/15 Budget** - Funding to arts programs administered by the Attorney-General's Department (\$33.8 million), the Australia Council (\$28.2 million) and Screen Australia (\$25.1 million).
- The Australia Council loses capacity to make good 6-year funding and go to 4-year. All organisations have to resubmit - The arts sector is decimated.
- For the Major Performing Arts Groups² ' funding is quarantined, ie safe. The MPA Framework, in existence under various titles since 1999, ensures the majority of available arts funding at the federal and state level is directed to 29 performing arts companies.
- When representatives of the small-to-medium sector travelled to Canberra to express concern about the changes, Minister Brandis declined to meet with them. He met with lobbyists from the major performing arts sector instead.
- The Catalyst program is a mess and a senate enquiry takes place.
- **2017 March** - The Minister announced that Catalyst will be discontinued. Mitch Fifield - new minister for the Arts returns some money (\$32 Million) to the OZCO but much is already promised through Catalyst.
- The Australia Council loses an effective \$14 Million

¹ The Australia Council for the Arts is the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body and is overseen by the Council Board (Board). It acts as arms length from the government and assesses grant applications through peer assessment. The Board is appointed by the Minister for the Arts and comprises a range of expertise across artistic practice, arts management, business, management, public policy, corporate governance and administration, regional issues, gender, multicultural and Indigenous community participation in the arts, finance, philanthropy, legal affairs, corporate strategy and research.

² For a full list of current MAPG see end of this paper

Minister Fifield said at the time: The department's stated mission is to work "*with government and industry to provide an environment in which all Australians can access and benefit from communications services, creative experiences and culture.*" It summarises its strategic direction under two broad aims:

- connectivity: enabling all Australians to connect to effective communications services and technologies, for inclusiveness and sustainable economic growth
- creativity and culture: supporting inclusiveness and growth in Australia's creative sector, and protecting and promoting Australian content and culture.³

In the New World - Minister Paul Fletcher - Communications and technology background. Creation of a Super-Ministry: the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications - where arts is no longer even in the name - (most of the work is in communications and technology, and tourism)

Arts sector has been reeling in uncertainty for over 5 years

From the Federal Government Budget review 2019/20⁴

Arts and cultural heritage consists of a number of components, including items from the Communications and the Arts portfolio and the Veterans Affairs portfolio i.e. Australia War Memorial. In terms of the Communications and the Arts portfolio, it includes funding for arts agencies and activities such as:

- Australia Council for the Arts
- Creative Partnerships Australia
- Australian Film Television and Radio School
- Australian National Maritime Museum
- National Gallery of Australia
- National Library of Australia
- National Museum of Australia
- Screen Australia
- National Film and Sound Archive
- Old Parliament House
- National Portrait Gallery of Australia
- Department of Communications and the Arts administered programs and support and
- Australian Screen Production Incentive.

Table 1 below indicates total expenditure for the Recreation and Culture function from 2018–19 to 2022–23.

³

<https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/communications-and-arts-portfolio-full-budget-document-2019-20>

⁴ <https://budget.gov.au/2019-20/content/bp1/download/bp1.pdf>

Table 1: total recreation and culture expenditure 2018–19 to 2022–23

(\$ million)	2018–19 (est.)	2019–20 (est.)	2020–21 (est.)	2021–22 (proj.)	2022–23 (proj.)
Broadcasting	1 490	1 476	1 482	1 494	1 500
Arts and cultural heritage	1 455	1 437	1 379	1 390	1 380
Sport and recreation	584	489	397	337	329
National estate and parks	459	448	480	494	487
Total	3 988	3 849	3 738	3 714	3 696

A disturbing downwards trend

In The Current Australia Council funding round for multi year funding

412 arts organisations applied in Round 1 (Shows a very broad creative sector, remembering people had to have the skills and management capacity to even apply in this round, including strategic plans for 5 years)

162 were invited to apply to stage 2

95 were successful

49 current out with transitional funding for 1 year. In the Territory that includes Tracks, Brown's Mart, and The Museum and Art Gallery

7+1 Australian Dance Companies in:

Australian Dance Theatre, Chunky Move, Dance North, Dance House, Force Majeure, Lucy Guerin, Marrugeku, +1 Blakdance (Funded through ATSI not dance)

6 Dance Companies out:

Australasian Dance Collective (Expressions), Branch Nebula, Restless Dance Theatre, Shaun Parker & Company, Tasdance and Tracks were amongst the 49 organisations who have lost their four-year funding. These companies will receive an additional 12 months funding at a reduced level (approximately 70%) aimed at helping them “recalibrate... and make plans for the future.”

As well as STRUT, Stephanie Lake, Ballet Lab, All The Queen's Men and Form who got through round 1, but not 2.

In 2016, 65 organisations lost their multi-year funding, including Ausdance National, KAGE, Force Majeure (back in) and Balletlab.

114 organisations since 2016 have lost Federal Funding

11 Territory Organisations in:

ANKA, Artback, Barkly Regional Arts, Corrugated Iron, Darwin Community Arts, Desart, Music NT, NT Writers Centre, Skinnyfish, Watch This Space, Incite. (3 Alice Springs central desert companies, 1 Barkly region, 7 Darwin Companies)

2019 Tracks Current Community Impact - 2019 Annual Report

- 17 new works created
- 25 performances
- 34 creatives employed
- 2,200 got involved
- 1,922 people volunteered skills and time
- 10,729 volunteer hours put into the community
- 12 weeks of choreographic research and development
- 2 mentorships
- 1 studio resident (due to not having a studio for half the year)

The current Federal Liberal National Party Government, since coming into power in 2013, has systematically cut away at the funding to its statutory arts funding body, the Australia Council For The Arts. The 2015 Brandis cuts were particularly savage, and the Australia Council, then as now, had to go against their own strategic plan in order to keep some of the sector afloat, the Council's overall budget remained \$20-25 million less than it was in 2015 cuts.

While the 28 "major performing arts companies" – a group which includes the 5 dance companies: Australian Ballet, Bangarra Dance Theatre, Queensland Ballet, Sydney Dance Company, and West Australian Ballet – (13 Opera, orchestra musical organisations, 8 theatre, and 2 circus) are unaffected by the changes, and soak up 3/5 of the available funding, smaller companies and independent artists do take the brunt of the cuts. The small to medium and independent sectors are where the research and development for the arts mainly occur, feeding outward and onward to the major organisations that have little room to be as experimental or innovative.

The heart of this is how the current Federal Government (or the opposition) value the creativity of this country. In the April 8, 2020 cabinet speech the Prime Minister - Scott Morrison, listed sectors hit hard by COVID-19. (Child care, workers in accommodation, hospitality and retail services, seasonal workers). Missing were

artists, arts workers and the Creative sector. Many of whom are not eligible for the economic lifelines being offered. Even in this climate, we are invisible to the Federal Government, despite huge visibility in response to the fires and the COVID-19 crisis. *“Staying indoors and washing our hands may keep us alive, but the Australian government needs to protect the arts in order to help us live.”* Benjamin Law - Writer, Journalist,

In times of crisis, such as now, it is this creative powerhouse that drives innovation, connects people, provides meaning, and much needed focussed distraction, as well as mental health and well-being outcomes. The sector also provides many jobs, most of them casual, and not 12 months consistent casual with one employer. It is a mobile, nimble, under-resourced sector. A report from the Federal Department of Communication and the Arts said that as of 2017, "cultural and creative activity" was generating \$111.7 billion for the Australian economy annually, or 6.4 per cent of the GDP, with a 15 per cent increase in 2018. (In Contrast: Construction: 7.4% Mining: 5.8% Manufacturing: 5.8% Agriculture: 2.8% (2017)⁵

An SGS Economics and planning report found that the creative sector:⁶

- contributes around \$90.19 billion to the national economy annually
- adds almost \$45.89 billion to Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP)
- helps generate exports of \$3.2 billion annually, and
- employs more than 600,000 people in Australia, with 263,563 embedded in non-creative industries.
- The Australian creative industries sector also employs many volunteers. Their contribution was not included within estimates due to insufficient data.

But this Government, while seeming to enjoy the large scale entertainment from the Major Performing Arts Groups, appears to have an aversion to things that might challenge or question. We see this in their funding cuts to, amongst other areas, the arts, the ABC, health, women’s services, education, State Fire Services, and which they house in the language of having to make “tough decisions”. But what about now? How do those tough decisions stack up in the light of what Australians really need in a time of crisis? We are all good when the going is good, but our metal is tempered through adversity, challenge, crisis, and how we come together – and no-one knows this better than artists and arts workers.

It is also a little-known fact that the majority of tourists come to Australia for our cultural offerings, despite the tourism sector's obsession with promoting sporting

⁵ <https://www.industry.gov.au/data-and-publications/industry-insights>

⁶ <https://www.sgsep.com.au/projects/australias-creative-industries-valuation>

events and the natural environment. Most people will not know this as the Government's statistics are based on big dollars spent, nights spent in hotels and some sense of an overgrowing world that gets richer, bigger, and just simply more. There is more at stake to lose a dedicated Arts portfolio than simple economic values. Especially in a time of widespread unemployment forced on many.

It can seem easy to say (as George Brandis did in 2015) that the arts as found in the small to medium and independent sectors have limited value to anyone except the artists themselves who show no responsibility to anyone else, especially not the taxpayer who is actually funding them. (A presumption indeed as the taxpayer funds the Government, who then decides on the policies, portfolios, and budgets). He said that as Minister he would have final say about funding and guidelines. He also said *Arts funding has until now been limited almost exclusively to projects favoured by the Australia Council. The National Programme for Excellence in the Arts will make funding available to a wider range of arts companies and arts practitioners, while at the same time respecting the preferences and tastes of Australia's audiences.* Not only is this not true, as the Government has the largest amount of the budget at its own discretion, but this basic devaluing of the arts gives a general impression that they are disposable and that money can be better spent elsewhere. From this point of view, cutting funding to the arts looks like it's "doing the right thing" or "tightening the belt", getting rid of frivolities and focusing on what's important.

A combination of cutting funding to the small to medium organisations along with safety netting of major organisations associated with historically 'elitist' art forms (none of which are in the Northern Territory) contributes to creating the ongoing narrative in this country that the arts are only for the wealthy and well-educated.

It is important to assert that the arts provide far more to far more people than just the numbers employed. For Tracks Dance Company - as an example:

- The weekly Grey Panthers class for older adults (going for 30 years with over 30 participants), many with varying degrees of ability, providing a healthy and creative living for our aging population. As one said; *"It is my highlight of the week"*. For another: *"I never thought of myself as a creative person, and now I am proudly giving back to my Community."* For many used to isolation in their daily lives this guaranteed weekly meetup is life-giving.
- Work in the very remote Indigenous communities that are already so depressed, under-resourced, ignored, patronised and constantly under the thumb – Where the Milpirri project becomes like community Christmas with the entire community involved somehow in a full-length dance work that is driven by Warlpiri values, ideas, and ceremony and

presented by the youth and the elders of the community. (Imagine that, let's say 95% of the community either performing or watching. In Darwin that would be, per capita, 125,000 people involved in one event)

- Work with other artists from other artforms such as music and design, where together the collaboration gives new insights to our lives. Cross fertilization and hybridising leads to new ways of seeing the world and provides social meaning through the shared work created, then shared by many and creating a sense of our own control of our own culture.
- The multiform artists in our development program that get to work in an environment of collaboration and rich research and development, a hothouse for the new ideas.
- Any of our 1,900+ volunteers that are given a chance to give something back to their community, with love, care and compassion.
- The Choreographer absorbing all the information that surrounds them in their place and beyond and through concentrated and determined effort create a meaningful interaction that speaks to other people.
- That weekly dance class that allows you to forget the daily stress, and gets you in a room of people not of your choosing, enjoying yourself to the max, creating a new sense of community.

And you don't even have to have a direct experience yourself. We are also affected by our interactions with others, many of who may have had the initial arts experience. Arts help shape our community conversations, far more broadly than jobs and growth.

The Arts have now even lost their ministerial voice – try looking for it on the Federal Government's websites. The new Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications makes no references to its Arts responsibilities at all. The Minister is Paul Fletcher. [Here is his email address: Paul.Fletcher.MP@aph.gov.au if you wish to ask him anything]

Paul Fletcher, as the Minister for Communications and the Arts, was quick to allay concerns that the Arts portfolio, which he asked PM Scott Morrison to assign to him, is being downgraded in what the Prime Minister has described as a drive for greater efficiencies. "Don't be concerned, the same resources are there," he told the ABC. This is patently untrue.

However, the outgoing Secretary of the Departments of Communications and the Arts, Mike Mrdak, sent a different message. The veteran bureaucrat emailed staff the day the super-department was announced and he wasn't compliant.

"We were not permitted any opportunity to provide advice on the machinery of government changes, nor were our views ever sought on any proposal to abolish the department or to changes to our structure and operations," Mr Mrdak wrote.

In an interview with ABC TV News arts show The Mix, Paul Fletcher said: *"Artists and their managers have to work harder to build a narrative around their work to connect it with the community funding it."*

There is disregard for the small to medium sector, or key organisations, (who gain ¼ of the funding of the Major Arts Organisations, yet have more audiences and create more Australian art-work). This is a vital, valuable, and productive industry, and in the current times, it is to the arts that people are turning for comfort, joy, inspiration, imagination, and importantly – connection. When we come through the current crisis people will be looking to cultural enterprise to make sense of what is left after the greed of capitalism has all but collapsed.

The sector is an ecosystem, connected, cross-fertilising, feeding and producing food for thought. The last 7 years of slowly felling the ecosystem will leave it in the same state that successive governments have left the environment; bleached with no way of recovering, burnt out, and the lack of biodiversity replaced by weeds.

The major organisations cannot exist without the experimental and challenging work that the small to medium and independent sectors provide. People have to be trained, inspired, tested, supported to fail in the pursuit of learning; Where do people like Miranda Tapsell, start? Darwin's Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre! As Lucy Guerin puts it, "Independent and small organisations are the life-blood of Australia's dance ecology."

Our culture is a steady source of thoughts, feelings, stories, images and moments which coalesce and collectively define us. Our sense of self, of community, of Nation, does not just appear. It is built by cultural expressions that take hold in our psyches. Culture brings us pleasure, connection, meaning and joy, and in the current situation that's a significant contribution to our narrowing lives. It is where we may find our 'best' selves. Interacting with the arts, whether doing, thinking, experiencing, engaging – tends to lead to a generosity of spirit. The arts are driven by a desire to share, rather than to monetise. Sure we need money in this society, but the arts are so much more than a simple economic transaction.

It is hard to wonder what a 30-year record (Tracks work goes back to 1988) will leave behind as a legacy for the NT. If we go, does all that go with us? Just ask what happened to all that knowledge gained through decades of Brown's Mart Community Arts. The Australia Council has been about a 1/3 of Tracks' income, and it is what

has allowed us to maintain a dedicated core team to run the company, as well as enabling us to plan into a future, producing original, and radically local dance. It has been the backbone of our sustainability and the thousands of people we interact with - especially important right now.

Without this national voice, it will be harder to influence those at the table, reminding Australians that there is more to the arts than big cities, that individual artforms mean less than a collective culture. I remind you that the Australia Council for the Arts said all they needed to fund all projects that were considered of excellence was \$30.9 million

As a footnote - Here is the list of the Major Performing Arts Organisations

There is not one Major Organisation in the Northern Territory.

5 Dance Companies:

The Australian Ballet
Bangarra Dance Theatre
Queensland Ballet
Sydney Dance Company
West Australian Ballet Company

13 Music Organisations:

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra
Australian Brandenburg Orchestra
Australian Chamber Orchestra
Melbourne Symphony Orchestra
Musica Viva Australia
Orchestra Victoria
Opera Australia
Opera Queensland
Queensland Symphony Orchestra
State Opera of SA
Sydney Symphony Orchestra
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
Victorian Opera
West Australian Opera
West Australian Symphony Orchestra

8 Theatre Companies:

Bell Shakespeare Company
Black Swan State Theatre Company
Company B
Malthouse Theatre
Melbourne Theatre Company
Queensland Theatre Company
State Theatre Company of SA
Sydney Theatre Company

2 Circus Companies:

Circa Contemporary Circus
Circus Oz