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Ten dos and don'ts for thinking about arts funding and the NPEA

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It's a common nightmare. You're on stage, about to perform. Suddenly your mind goes blank. Your lines desert you. You stumble, unsure of your moves. The cast is oblivious. The audience is hostile. Things go from bad to worse. What play are you in again? Your lack of preparation is plain for all to see. The moment goes on and on and on ... endlessly.

Spare a thought for Senator Brandis, whose vision of a National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) is wobbling like cardboard scenery. The reading of the more than 2,200 submissions to the Senate Inquiry has just begun. But from examination of the tip of the iceberg – about 430 are available online at time of writing – most will not be supporting the planned changes. Reasons range from access and diversity issues, to disruptions in the national arts ecology.

The minister can put a spin on this – and does. But his arguments look tendentious. It takes a certain effrontery to lean on the major arts organisations (or cause them to be leant on) to stay silent and then claim:

I haven't seen a single word of criticism about the proposal from any of [these] companies.

Foyer chit-chat is “boards and artists are not aligned” – which is one way of putting it. Protests that the Senate Inquiry is “a political exercise” ring equally hollow. Politics is what members of the Upper House are paid to engage in.

Former Quadrant editor Keith Windschuttle might think the Minister's cuts to the Australia Council's budget “a stroke of genius”. Most see them as an unwarranted attack on smaller arts organisations.

Behind the colour and movement, however, lies a persistent problem. Despite the Minister's inability to articulate this in a non-*ad hominem* way, it is worth serious consideration. How can common standards apply to a sector with so much difference? Artists must take the opportunity to sharpen their minds as well as their pens. The implications of the NPEA go beyond the polemical.

Given this, we have developed 10 dos and don'ts for thinking about the debate around “excellence” and the peer review grant process.

Dos and Don'ts

- 1) Do know the history of the Australia Council, both recent and early (it's nearly 50 years old now). Read Justin Macdonnell's *Arts, Minister?* (1992), still the best account of the beginnings of the agency and the ferocious politics around its principles of operation.
- 2) Don't get lured into arguments about redistribution of existing funds. Or, if you do, keep the debate specific. It is easy for governments to play off cultural organisations against each other in a stoush about relative merit when absolute levels of support should also be a topic of discussion.
- 3) Do be aware that when it comes to political support for the arts it's the middle against the extremes. Both Liberal and Labor parties shade off into indifference to the sector, if not hostility, the further you get to the edges. It's a question of navigating the factions. The current Liberal government is controlled by the Right. But that dominance won't last forever.
- 4) Do build alliances across the industry. Expressions of solidarity between artists and arts organisations are the most effective way of shaping (and resisting) initiatives handed down on high by governments. This is hard to achieve in such a diverse sector. But the benefits are potentially great.
- 5) Don't play the personalities. Or not *just* the personalities. The current crisis is an expression of long-term systemic issues not just short-term ministerial opinion. These need illuminating.
- 6) Do become policy-literate. The best guide to what governments will do is what they have done. This applies not only to Australia's own history, but to other countries' policies as well. Past and comparative experience is a vital point of reference.

7) Don't be cowed into staying silent. Bullying arts organisations is easy given their uneven public support. The support is there, but it's sprinkled across myriad different institutions and audiences. Rolling over won't work in the policy arena, however, any more than it does in the schoolyard.

8) Do feel free to change your mind. Art is about commitment and vision. Policy is about effectiveness and outcomes. Your opinions should change as a) new information becomes available or b) the situation alters and requires a different response. Just because something was relevant 10 years ago doesn't mean it's relevant now.

9) Don't be tricked into treating adjectives as nouns. If someone tells you they support "excellence" in the arts (or "innovation" or "equity"), ask them what they mean exactly. Ask for examples, and for the thinking behind those examples. Don't debate the meaning of words unless they have a context to be meaningful in.

10) Do have a considered view. Change for change's sake is time-consuming and costly. The important thing is to convert your opinion into a position, something other arts organisations, the sector, and the government, have to take seriously when considering the common good.

When it comes to culture, controversies usefully illuminate clandestine assumptions. It could be seen last year in the Minister's ill-tempered reaction to the Sydney Biennale walk-out. It can be seen again in his NPEA proposal that is, in part, a response to that earlier brouhaha.

Controversies also raise important questions about how culture is to be valued. Senator Brandis says the decision to sequester a chunk of the Council's budget for "excellent" art was based on a realisation that:

there was really nothing for the arts minister to do as a result of the arrangements left to us by the Labor Party.

But the problem of defining "excellence" is a deep one, and deserves better treatment than this.

We have recently argued that the assessment of culture is fraught with dispute about where its value really lies. Does it lie with creators, "users", the general public (including "non-users"), with future "users", with history's judgement?

It is an irreducibly political problem, and has to be dealt with in a dialogic way, not hidden behind the veil of ministerial tastes.

Senator Brandis argues that the NPEA is an attempt to make funding "more democratic". But awarding subsidy according to vague criteria, with the ability to veto decisions, and give money in secret, is the opposite of that.

Everyone involved in culture – practitioners, politicians and audiences – is implicated in a problem of defining value that is complex, heterogeneous and contentious. If the Australia Council struggles to achieve perfect outcomes, it's not because it is a “closed shop”. It's because delivering equitable, effective arts funding is very difficult.

The answer is not to brusquely quarantine funds for personal bestowal. It is to rethink the balance of interests in arts subsidy holistically.

It's time for the Minister to wake up to that reality.