

Government turns its back on the opportunity to fix arts funding mess

Hopes that the government would take the opportunity to fix the mess it created twelve months ago were dashed, with no mention of arts and culture in the pre-election Budget handed down in Canberra last night.

ArtsPeak spokesperson and Executive Director of the National Association for the Visual Arts, Tamara Winikoff OAM said, "Unfortunately when it comes to the arts, it seems this government is not concerned about forcing job losses and causing chaos, the very opposite of the PM's mantra about jobs and growth. The 2016 Budget does nothing to redress the devastating impact of the cuts to the Australia Council and ongoing 'efficiency dividend' imposed by the government in 2014 and 2015. The cuts total more than \$42 million/year. Massive destabilisation of the arts industry is resulting from decisions made by the current government, and without any policy framework, it looks set to continue."

Nicole Beyer, ArtsPeak spokesperson and Director of Theatre Network Australia said, "Australians who value a vibrant arts and cultural sector are becoming increasingly critical of a government that disregards the long-term health of the arts while appearing to pursue short-term political gains. The first full round of Catalyst decisions, just announced after a long delay, have been made through opaque assessment processes. Some decisions don't follow the program's own guidelines, and announcements have been being used to boost electoral advantage.

For example, the \$1m funding granted for the acquisition of the property of early Australian artist Hans Heysen goes against Catalyst's own guidelines which preclude the funding of 'built or natural heritage'. The Minister's media release even acknowledged the role of the member for that seat, Cory Bernardi, as an advocate for the project."

Removing funds that sustain the backbone of creative practice – the small to medium arts organisations (S2Ms) – will leave a legacy that will cost future governments and generations significantly more to redress. The constant message from last year's Senate Inquiry was that the arts and cultural ecology is one of interdependency between artists, S2Ms and major arts organisations. The damage to today's talent will manifest itself right across the sector for many years to come.

Also increasingly evident are the consequences of the imposition of efficiency dividends on other already underfunded national institutions. This has resulted in the withdrawal of important services, especially to regional Australia where populations depend on travelling exhibitions and digital services.

All parties are now on notice to address the parlous state of federal funding of arts and culture by producing meaningful policies and allocating adequate resources to implement them. It is time for the electorate to closely question candidates over the next seven weeks about their parties' arts and cultural policies, and to publicly seek answers about the future of an industry that contributes so significantly to our economy and way of life.

For media comment please contact:

Tamara Winikoff OAM, Executive Director, National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)
0411 162 156 / 02 9368 1900

Nicole Beyer, Director, Theatre Network Australia 0432 609 658