

*Give wings to the arts:
A new model for arts funding*

By Rodney Hall

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The contribution the arts can make to present day Australia

The coalition government has delivered us a society fixated on putting money values to everything, a society looking backward to an irretrievable past for its cultural values, a society in which selfishness is paraded as a virtue.

As a nation, under John Howard's leadership, we have set out on the perilous course of denying the need for rethinking our place in the world and identifying with our neighbours in the region. And this proceeds in defiance of the economic reality that Japan, China and Korea, combined, plainly dominate the future as far as our export expansion opportunities lie.

I think the Prime Minister is right when he claims that the majority of people have now turned their backs on the values espoused by Labor under Paul Keating. Not only this but, as a nation, we have turned our backs on our history in an attempt to restore the blinkered jingoism of the 1950s. Right from the beginning of his term Howard's attack on so-called Political Correctness was a manoeuvre to give licence to bigotry (viz. the strategy with Pauline Hanson). The sad truth is that he has made this work. Australia today is not the Australia of a decade ago.

But Howardism is not pre-ordained. His success has reaffirmed the fact that people do change their minds, they *can* be persuaded. Axiomatically, they can and will change again.

To bring about this change the starting point is surely our self-perception as a people.

A new Labor government has the task of putting forward a vision for a humane and enlightened future – one which people can respond to, feeling themselves caught up by a sense of excitement that something new is happening. For this, our values need to be addressed. And – as always in the past – artists and the media can give a massive boost to this process.

In addition to film stars and others publicly supporting Labor, the arts in general make a special contribution to our capacity to see ourselves (both as individuals and as a nation) and see ourselves with the eyes of others. They can be a tremendous resource when learning to welcome and embrace difference. Internationally, the arts are a significant force at the interface between cultures and internally they are a cohesive connection in sustaining stability within a diverse society.

There is nothing new in this. It is so in every country. To take an American example: the movies, Westerns in particular, played a huge part in shaping US self-perception. In our own case – given a 100 year retrospective – we might well ask: Who remembers Baron Northcote or George Reid? In 1904 Northcote was Governor-General, Reid was Prime Minister. They are all but forgotten. Yet Henry Lawson, a contemporary of theirs, made an immense impact on the nation's psyche.

The arts are not a mere sweetener, a few curlicues of icing on the cake. At their most adventurous they go to the heart of the matter: they explore and reveal us to ourselves. Such plays as 'The Shifting Heart' and 'The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' helped us articulate the changes happening around us. The arts also work on us at a deep psychological level, even exercising a beneficial impact on health and

happiness. The arts make us feel better. In the case of music therapy these benefits become quantifiable. Such therapy in hospitals – and during neurological investigations of the reactions of the human brain to stimulus – suggest that music has a deep effect on health and wellbeing.

The government's outlay on arts subsidies may well be seen as modest and strategically placed within the overall costs of public health.

Most people (especially the young) would find life intolerable without music, without films, videos, books, art and the theatre. What's more, the high end of these expressions of our human experience, the R&D of experimental art, inform and enrich the popular products as well. Although most people would never consider going to a concert hall to hear 'contemporary classical' music, they regularly experience it at the cinema. To give another example: the theme song of 'Jesus Christ Superstar' is entirely lifted from Joseph Haydn's string quartet 'Seven Last Words of Our Lord on the Cross', very much as the music of Alexander Borodin was lifted for the popular musical 'Kismet' a generation earlier. The *makers* of popular art are consumers of serious art. So ideas spread.

In addition to the need for the arts in any healthy society, Australian art in all its forms (from film to the dot paintings of the Central Desert) is as much an international showcase of the nation and what the nation stands for as our sporting prowess.

Cultural delivery with governmental support

The issue of the overall budget allocated at present – both at the national and state level – is not as central as may be thought. Although good use could always be found for increased arts funding, the amount provided continues to be on a healthy scale.

Yet during the past ten years there has been a dramatic decline in the production of new Australian work throughout the country. Such indicators as the steep decline in the number and quality of new Australian films tell the story. A similarly steep decline in fiction titles published – some 40% down in a 24 month period – or Playbox Theatre Company's abandonment of their policy of specialising in new Australian plays, offer evidence which is only the proverbial tip of an iceberg affecting everything from modern dance through to the crafts. This decline is reflected in both the quality and the quantity of new art being produced. Why? Where funding is concerned (although funding is only part of the issue, it is the part that most immediately concerns government) the cause can be found in what Dr Jean Battersby (founding CEO of the Australia Council) calls 'bureaucratic creep'. This combines damagingly with the greed of arts managers and arts organisations out in the field. A huge unknowable proportion of the public funding provided ends up in the pockets of arts bureaucrats rather than artists. And the situation is getting worse.

Whatever area of the arts one cares to enquire into, the story is the same: managers live at the luxury end of the scale while independent artists struggle in poverty.

So, what kind of future are we offering to the hundreds and hundreds of young people graduating from our universities and training institutions each year – dancers, actors, painters, sculptors, writers,

composers, musicians – all pouring out into the community with next to nothing to go to. For those who are performers, employment opportunities by medium-level companies has all but vanished from the scene. The established performance companies with relatively secure funding have become like fortresses, in some cases with more administrative staff than artistic personnel, carrying a superstructure that obliges them to offer safer and safer box-office fare to support their costs.

They dare not risk putting on new art because, especially if it has power and lasting value, it is seldom immediately assimilable – and therefore seldom immediately popular. If encouraged, its *lasting* value, by contrast, is beyond price. Very small venues and shoestring operations still battle on valiantly. But the small-to-medium sized professional providers have mostly gone to the wall, while the funds are eaten up by the large companies with expensive overheads.

Even individual creative artists discover that much of the public funding apparently allocated to their field of endeavour goes into the pockets of organisations and consultants. What worthwhile book was ever written at a Writers' Centre, for example? How does it benefit a sculptor for costly research projects to confirm the fact that he/she is poor?

Central to bringing about a revitalised cultural sector is recognition of the fact that, ever since corporatisation set in, survival problems have arisen for the actual producers of new art. *Decorporatisation* needs to be encouraged, plus a recovery of the understanding that what matters is delivery, not process. What is needed at the Australia Council is not restructuring but *deconstructing*. Delivery for the Australian people is generated by freedom of expression for artists, not administrative control by arts bureaucrats.

Action required

Given that the pot of available money is unlikely to grow, this money needs to be better spent.

A national overview of governmental arts funding would suggest the need for coherent patterns of national and state funding which intermesh and complement each other, rather than overlapping. This overlap generally occurs on the big and glamorous items. But, anyone who has attended Cultural Ministers Council meetings will, I think, agree that such sensible hopes are extremely unlikely to be found acceptable to the states on the macro scale. In my view, any formula for addressing them should pursue simple and painless areas of cooperation.

The calendar of application deadlines and committee decisions, for example, could be set at polar times of year – eg Commonwealth grants announced in March and September, States grants in June and December – allowing both levels of government to assess and take into account factors arising from each other's policies and actual funding allocations. Also, planning could be set in place to 'customise' the programs offered to make them more distinctive: for example a further tendency toward funding established artists of proven talent at the national level being balanced by a tendency to fund projects for place-specific delivery at the state level. By stretching and bending what is already there a new integration could be initiated without inviting the confrontation of an attempt at major reforms.

The essence of complementarity is that of an arm's-length model complementing the ministerial model.

The centrepieces of Commonwealth funding are, of course, the Australia Council, the Australian Film Commission and the Film Finance Corporation.

Film

Where film is concerned, the principal issue to be addressed is the interdependency of factors: not just the interdependency of film and television, but the flow-on dependencies of interactivity between the arts. The health of the film industry directly affects the ABC, theatre, literature, design, actors, directors, musicians and composers.

The main public film funding components are, of course, the AFC, the FFC, plus the state government agencies. Broadly, the philosophy of public funding ought to be that of securing quality leverage in a mixed funding structure that includes a significant input from speculative investors. The main issue with film is and always will be private investment. Unless the government comes forward with a scheme offering something in the region of 120% tax breaks nothing much will happen to break the current stalemate and restore the industry to its glory days. Once the tax incentive is in place the advantage of public money is that the FFC can (and should) exercise a balance of power over private investors to ensure a quality outcome.

To operate successfully the FFC needs sufficient funds to intervene effectively. The current funding falls well below the critical minimum needed for this to be put into effect. A sensible minimum for this valuable industry (Australia's shop-window, apart from other considerations) would be \$100 million. Funding at this level would be sufficient to leverage something in the region of \$500 million-worth of production investment. And that half-billion would be sufficient to revive the industry.

At present it is glaringly obvious that international distributors are not at all interested in Australia products *because* they are Australian. They don't even get looked at in a marketing context such as the trading that takes place at the Cannes Festival. We have fallen from the status of a favoured nation, thirty years ago, to being way down at the bottom of the pile. By contrast, the recent burgeoning of the Korean film industry is an example of how swiftly such a slump can be reversed, given adequate and appropriate financing structures.

At present, in several states, that hugely expensive infrastructures that have been put in place in several states risk standing idle. The industrial substructure teeters on the brink of collapsing altogether. There are even cases of Australian facilities being offered free-of-charge to foreign productions (currently several from the USA), simply to keep them operational. This is a direct consequence of inadequate investment funding.

The role of the AFC and the state funding agencies, by contrast to the FFC, is developmental. By and large, they are well run and efficient. They and the FFC are sensibly kept separate. However, where development seeding grants are concerned, I believe the AFC and the state film funding bodies would be wise to review their rigidly script-based assessment, which has the paralysing effect of locking

filmmakers into being writers first and squeezes out those film-makers who think visually and may best develop their ideas in purely filmic terms.

The Arts in General

On the surface, the Australia Council may appear to be going well. Funding has been maintained – and this is a considerable achievement considering the antagonism of the Coalition when in opposition. The Council is excellently managed ... if we are to look at it in the strictly business/financial sense. The gloss of Council's self-presentation has never been more polished or self-regarding. However, this surface conceals a multitude of problems, as was shown during the recent near-insurrection of staff against a major restructuring of the boards. This was a sign that all is not well with the distinctively top-down style of the present regime. Much that appears well-run is more a matter of spin than substance.

There are serious issues not being addressed at all. The direction the Australia Council has taken under Howard has drifted significantly away from those areas in which it previously contributed so effectively to the richness of Australian culture and returned to the taxpayer a magnificent cultural treasury – both for the present and future generations. Instead, the organization has become inward-looking, the scope of its operations is narrowing (the abolition of the Community Cultural Development Board and New Media Arts Board, dramatic in itself, was the outward sign of a far deeper and more general malaise).

On 10 March 2005 a meeting was called of previous Chairs and CEOs of the Australia Council by the present incumbents to discuss the ramifications of their proposed restructuring. The meeting was designated as taking place between 3.30 - 5.30pm – this alone declared that the essential purpose of the occasion was no more than window-dressing. And when the Ozco News newsletter eventually came out in April (issue 11) it became plain that nothing which had been said at that meeting by previous leaders (the few who chose to attend) had made the slightest impact on the resolve of the present regime. This culture of top-down management is entirely consonant with the organisation's attitude to clients.

The Major Performing Arts Board, with its triennial funding agreements, has proved a signal success in completely eradicating those vexatious attacks in the media which previously dogged the Council at every step. And this is a positive thing. However, I do believe the MPAB budget should be pegged at indexation for the foreseeable future to allow smaller players with less pushy, less high profile boards of directors to flourish.

Where individual artists are concerned, a detailed study of their present parlous situation may be found in *Don't Give Up Your Day Job: an economic study of professional artists in Australia*, David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, published by the Australia Council, 2003.

In order to discover what needs to be done we need to look beyond the council offices and examine what is actually being produced for the benefit of the Australian people in the name of arts funding. We need to ask: Is there a vibrant imaginative buzz out there, a collective energy, an excitement? The same

circumstances apply whether we look at art, sport, science or even investment: there needs to be an environment of confidence. The first port of call in tackling the problem would involve some kind of audit of what is being created and produced – plus how much of it reaches audiences in city and country and overseas. Key questions need to be answered: What is life like for the producers of art? How is the morale of those who create this new work? What are the opportunities and how do these affect productivity? What does the climate for new work feel like? Is the academically-derived provision of Fellowships the best model for assisting individual artists?

Organisational plans and programs are all very well, but they are not self-justifying. In the final analysis, nothing, in the store of our cultural heritage, will replace original works of art.

In the entire summary of ‘developments’ in the ‘new Australia Council’ policy pamphlet (April 2005) there is no reference whatsoever to needs of the creators and producers of art, only a promise to run ‘workshops and seminars’ for them ... in other words attempting to draw the artists into the bureaucratic world of the office, rather than putting administrators out there in the field to see and appreciate what is being produced and to address artists’ needs. ‘New art’ is not mentioned at all. Neither is there even a passing hint of concern at the depressing picture painted by their own survey of artists’ incomes (Throsby and Hollister). Instead, there is the rhetoric of the ‘healthy organisation’ reflecting on its own role and praising its effectiveness at its own evaluation.

I have spent time in the past five years, mainly in Melbourne, discussing future prospects with young artists, performers and writers graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts, Victoria University and Melbourne University. They graduate full of hope. But sadly, the ambition to dedicate oneself fulltime to an arts practice swiftly recedes. All too soon, the very idea seems remote indeed to these talented young people. Universally, when asked what role they think the Australia Council might have in assisting the development of their careers, I have been met with a blank. The Council is no longer considered relevant, its logo almost entirely associated with the Australian Ballet and other such large companies with huge administrative overheads.

A flood of young talent continues to pass in and out through the gates of our training institutions, graduating into a future that offers them next to nowhere to go. Why? Because the established companies and orchestras have limited places that come available and the freelance arts continue to lose ground, lose confidence, lose continuity and context. These losses began slowly, but they are now swift. Far from finding a community eager to hear what they have to say through their art, these young people feel stifled and blocked. The resultant wastage of talent makes a mockery of the education and training they receive – often excellent – quite apart from blighting their personal hopes. For them to have a future the profession(s) need to be nurtured, supported and valued by the community. Projects for emerging artists only take them one step of the way. They need a sense of somewhere to go, a cohort of peers to aspire to.

Meanwhile, back at the Council, amid all the flurry of apparent change, senior management is busy consolidating the status quo. The recent reappointment of David Gonski as Chair for a further two years simply confirms the government’s satisfaction with the corporate way things are being done. As the ultimate hands-off chairman, he has signally failed to position himself as head of the organisation, let alone head of the peer-based stream of its structure.

An analysis of the present situation of the arts, vis-à-vis public funding, will show one consistent result: If one applies the corporate model of governance, complete with performance indicators, to the big players with staff and accountants (the major organizations, basically) then things are looking pretty settled and stable – though how long Major Performing Arts Board clients can keep paying hefty salaries to their directors remains to be seen. In a climate when so many actors are unemployed and the established companies whittle down the casts they are prepared to put on stage, the salary base in excess of \$200,000 for an artistic director (see, for example, the state theatre companies) is not just indefensible it is inexcusable.

What's more there is an aspect to this that verges on an abuse of privileges. When the original Major Organisations Board was first being negotiated (the proto-type of the MPAB) one of the valued concessions offered by the Australia Council was non-interference in their programming or artistic decisions. This was an issue of good faith based on the companies' respecting the Council's priorities and working to be, as much as possible, in harmony with these priorities.

Even the issue of quality of productions has gone by the board ... so that Opera Australia, for example, feels it can get away with the blatant incompetence of a tired revival as its current 2005 production of 'The Magic Flute' in which some of the cast cannot even sing the notes. On top of which, the only professional theatre company to specialise in new Australian plays (mostly commissioned), Melbourne's Playbox Theatre, has now abandoned that commitment ... apparently without a murmur of complaint from the Australia Council, despite the fact that this was the central reason for including Playbox among the major organisations in the first place.

Meanwhile small to mid-sized performance companies go to the wall. These companies in the cities, plus regional dance and theatre companies and music ensembles, once provided the life-blood of performing arts delivery ... and indeed the lifeblood of talent for the large companies. They have been neglected and starved of funds instead of being nurtured and encouraged to innovate. For just about everyone outside the major performing companies the times are difficult, fraught and in many cases desperate.

Special credit is due to those who survive by getting smart. Some among these medium sized enterprises offer strong examples of skilful planning. The State Opera of South Australia is perhaps the best example. With their Ring Cycle, they positioned themselves to fulfil a unique role and to attract an audience from interstate and even overseas. The second Ring Cycle (this time fully their own) has been designed with a fully dismantlable and portable set for touring – and is ideally positioned for export. Around the Ring Cycle they have structured a program of other Wagner works plus contemporary opera, giving them single set pieces for sending to interstate festivals. It can be done.

Instead of addressing issues of this kind with vigour and encouraging others to position themselves more strategically the Australia Council seems preoccupied with restructuring its own internal power elite and is in the process of adding another level just under the peak of the pyramid. This amounts to one thing, essentially. They have ceased to ask the basic question: What are we here to achieve?

This was the question Nugget Coombs and Jean Battersby answered during the establishment period 1968-73 and answered so effectively that they changed the cultural landscape in this country. One simple and sweeping indicator of this success was that, between 1968 and 1995, Australian artists of all kinds were able, for the first time in our history, to pursue careers in our own country.

In recent times there has been a marked return to the bad old days of the pre-1970s, with many of our most gifted artists feeling they need to leave the country in order to have a career of any kind. This talent-drain is potentially catastrophic for the future of Australian culture, coming as it does at a time of such swift and all-encompassing globalisation, when national boundaries are being broken down and international stereotypes are taking over. There is no similar sense in which the Australia Council of today is rethinking its role in a changed Australia.

The need for rethinking the Australia Council

Starting from the premise that the sciences and the arts are the two great fields of enquiry of the humanist tradition for investigating and understanding ourselves and the universe around us, the arts do not need justification as industries. There are, indeed, industries that grow up around them which do, indeed, yield colossal financial benefit and employment opportunities to the community. But I believe Government should regard this as an adjunct benefit rather than the core argument for the provision of funding. Many of the arts do not yield measurable or practical outcomes when subjected to the industrial model of short term performance indicators. It is better to state their value as cultural, right up front, much as we believe in funding education *as* education.

People understand perfectly well that life would be inconceivable without the arts, without (as I put it earlier) music, without films, videos, books, art or the theatre. A declaration by government of the principal benefits to the people that follow from funding the arts will shape the effectiveness of where and how those funds are spent. Once it is accepted that the Australia Council's brief is to help facilitate the richest possible store of cultural assets to flourish for the benefit of the nation, then its future direction is already given focus. 'New Australian art' becomes the first priority (as it was before the Howard years) but the challenge will be new because the community is always changing. The question: What needs to be done next? is thrown into clear perspective by the fact that the Major Performing Arts Board money (over \$77.7 million in 2003-2004) is almost entirely spent on old art – splendid and precious old art, it must be agreed – but neither new nor Australian in origin. Creative artists, by contrast, who produce 100% new Australian art, are allocated a tiny fraction of this amount.

A fresh overview is needed, based on the real situation of those contributing directly to the national cultural treasury. Broadly, I believe the ALP would be well advised to view arts funding as falling into two basic categories [1] supporting established talent, [2] supporting projects (which includes all funding for emergent artists). These categories apply irrespective of art form. And they apply equally to the creative arts and the performing arts. Although this is already acknowledged in the performing arts by the very existence of the Major Performing Arts Board, the present system is punitive in its dealings with creative artists.

As things stand, no individual who has been the recipient of one fellowship may ever apply for another. If this principle (introduced under the banner of equity) were applied to the major organisations chaos would ensue. Equity is an important issue, but it must be structured within the acknowledgement that there is no equity of talent in the arts, any more than there is equity of talent among sports people.

But proven talent in individuals is precisely the area selected by the Australia Council for punishment by exclusion. High achievers, the fulltime professionals whose work is innovative and exploratory and therefore not likely to earn immediate returns (the reality of professional artists' incomes lies somewhere between the basic wage and half the basic wage), are only allowed once in a lifetime fellowships.

The ongoing scandal of the arts funding model (and one which I strove to address against the will of an unwilling Council, 1991-1994) is that the plight of independent established artists has been known since the 1970s, fully researched and documented in survey after survey. Yet it has never been adequately addressed. The Australia Council has fallen prey to what Dr Jean Battersby, its founding CEO, has lately called 'bureaucratic creep' (Deakin Lecture, Melbourne, 2005). The basic fact is that artists are agents of change (and axiomatically change is often uncomfortable), bureaucrats are not. Part of the role of new art is to defamiliarise the audience/reader ... and lead us into the unknown.

The needs of the sector are well documented already. A new arts policy needs new thinking.

I would recommend that, in government, the ALP should address the issue of the Australia Council by strengthening its arm's-length delivery (thereby also strengthening the complementarity with the ministerial States arts departments), its commitment to individuals (as the source of talent) and to the community (as its context). The Australia Council should be required to:

- ensure that 70% of board membership comprises genuine peers
- (i.e. people at the coalface who actually create the art and work at it as fulltime professionals)
- ensure that art form boards are chaired by significant artists
- restore the Community Cultural Development Board
- tackle Council's glaring failure to develop a program to address the issue of established independent artists living in poverty

I would also recommend that an ALP government should move to:

- curtail the present high level of the Australia Council's internal spending (reduce self-promotion, re-allocate tasks such as policy and planning – which have been taken over by staff during the past 12 years – and return them back to the art form boards
- curtail further spending on research – repeated surveys show the same needs, the same trends – and vigorously address the issues the researchers have been reiterating for the past 20 years).

Artists, like scientists, need thinking time and space for experimentation – even occasional failures – in order to build to major successes. When structuring for success in the research sciences, according to

Professor Suzanne Cory, director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, 'By far the most important element to include is star scientists.' The same may be said of the arts.

Individuals like Patrick White, Joan Sutherland, Sidney Nolan and Russell Crowe have raised the bar for everyone else – both as inspiration and as challenge. They have opened new territory and created opportunities for their followers and even their rivals, not least by promoting Australia's profile and paving the way for lesser (yet still valuable) talents. Professor Cory supported the above claim by citing the brilliant achievements at a single laboratory at Cambridge University which produced 8 Nobel Prize winners among 13 scientists who were colleagues there. She commented, 'Brilliance attracts brilliance.' Once again, as in the sciences, so in the arts.

Under an ALP government the Australia Council should be required to address the issue of long-term results in the form of a treasury of new art: an audit of what is being accumulated. Long term strategy is the strength, not the weakness, of the argument. Short term performance indicators are last year's news and soon forgotten. Therefore, I would recommend that funding for artists should take a similar path to funding for scientists. The laboratory model cannot be transferred across, but collective or group funding can.

Proposal

My proposal is for a new funding hub based on the opposite concept to the present scheme of Fellowships and grants. Instead of offering recipients short slabs of time out (one year or two), on the academic model, what the working artist needs is a flexible supplement to make up his/her earnings to a livable minimum. Low-level, long term top-up money could be provided through a group mechanism that addresses individual needs through separate collectives which I am calling Arts Wings. The collective productivity of each Wing will soon build to a steady level which can then be measured against the expenditure of public money and yield appropriate justification for the continuation of government investment in this sector.

As laid out below, the Wings scheme does address this issue and for an affordable budget, based on a model successfully applied in Ireland since 1990. Once this plan for creative artists is up and running, I believe a second such plan (suitably modified) could be made to work for independent performing artists, linked in with an earn-back scheme to offset the cost when they are employed by a company, ensemble or orchestra.

A suggested plan for assisting established, independent artists*

BACKGROUND

The present Fellowship policy of 'once in a lifetime', if applied to performing artists, would effectively destroy music, dance and opera in this country at a single stroke. Yet this is the stringent rule under which creative artists apply to Council the entire time. It did not used to be so.

There is no lesser need for subsidy for individuals who devote their lives to a fulltime commitment to their art than there is for companies who interpret and present other people's creations.

Every bit as strikingly, there is no parity between the value assigned to the creators of new Australian art and to the administrators of government funding. Senior artists can apply, at most, for 2 years only, at \$40,000. By contrast, at least twelve senior members of Australia Council staff draw salaries between \$100,000 and \$190,000, plus car, superannuation and package (in 2001 this figure was seven), in most cases with permanency, and the CEO receives between \$240,000 and \$290,000 (p.126 annual report 2003--2004).

How can this be justified? Council's own research demonstrates that most of our established artists earn incomes below \$25,000 from their work (the research itself being paid for, where commissioned, at hugely higher rates than independent artists can hope to earn). This situation is not being addressed by current policy.

GIVE 'WINGS' TO THE CREATIVE ARTS

The proposal is for a completely new concept in assistance for Australia's established artists, to replace both the Fellowships and New Works grants. This would be a system of long-term, low-level top-up money, channelled through a guild system of four *Wings* (as they might be called): the Visual Arts Wing, the Literature Wing, the Crafts Wing and the Composition & Choreography Wing. Each would be established with a fixed maximum membership and with an annual dedicated budget of \$1 million – in the case of the Visual Arts, the Crafts and Literature – or, in the case of Composition & Choreography, \$500,000. A total annual commitment, when fully operational, of \$3.5 million. For this outlay approximately 350 of our leading artists can be freed from the distractions of seeking outside work and enabled to concentrate on producing art at the highest level of their capacities.

The Wings

The suggestion is for the Visual Arts Wing, the Crafts Wing and the Literature Wing to each consist of 100 members. Where composers and choreographers are concerned, since far smaller numbers are engaged professionally in these fields, the Composition and Choreography Wing might then consist of 50 members.

The process of establishment would need to be developed incrementally over a period of, perhaps, three years.

Establishment of Wings

1. The current appropriate boards of the Australia Council to draw up a list of 40 acknowledged leaders in each field (10 each in the case of composition and choreography), based on those names short listed in major prizes during the previous five years, with special priority for those among them already dedicated to their art fulltime and not otherwise employed.
2. These individuals be invited to form the nucleus of the Wing.
3. Each of them be immediately invited to nominate a further 5 members.
4. The 200 nominations resulting from this process [item 3] to be collated, and then the 35 most frequent of them be duly accorded membership. Thus, in its initial year, each Wing would comprise 75% of full membership and would begin operations at 75% of budget, \$2,625,000.
5. After one year, each member would be invited to nominate 5 new members. The 25 persons most frequently nominated to be duly accorded membership, bringing the numbers to 100%, with 100% of allocated budget.
6. In subsequent years, vacancies on each Wing would become available as a result of resignations, deaths, or voluntary acceptance of Honorary Membership, etc. [Example: if, in one year, 5 such places became vacant, a simple advertisement would be published in the national press, inviting artists to nominate – no supporting material needed, no projects or anything of the kind, no assessment panel – simply a name. The administrative officer would then circulate to the membership an alphabetical list of all names received, requesting each member to tick five and five only, not in any order of preference. The five names most frequently ticked would be automatically accorded membership.] This system is closely based on a model that has worked well in Ireland.
7. Access to these funds would also be based on the Irish model of ‘Bidding’. Within simple guidelines, members would be invited to estimate their expected income for the coming year and bid for such top-up money as they expect to need to make up a workable income. If the collective Bid exceeds the allocated budget, a second form-letter goes to each member, explaining that the Bid came in over budget (and by how much), inviting him/her to reconsider and make a new bid in the light of the adjustment necessary. A second or third Bid – if the Irish experience is anything to go by – should bring the figure in under budget. If not, a further Bid would be required. In each case, a simple process costing no more than a few minutes of programming time. Once the total Bid falls within the budget the amounts requested would then be paid out, any surplus being carried forward to the next financial year.
8. The guidelines for Bidding might be as follows: no bid of over \$20,000 or under \$5,000 to be accepted. If, in any 3-year period, a member receives more than \$45,000, he or she must allow a year to elapse without a bid. The maximum any artist could then benefit from the scheme would average out at \$15,000 per annum – a very modest outlay for our most talented creators – one twentieth of the annual salary enjoyed by the Council’s CEO.
9. Acquittals by participating artists. Wing members to agree to the same terms as the present fellowship holders: presenting the Australia Council with documentary evidence of work done (copies of books, programs, catalogues, etc.). Perhaps a special presentation of outcomes might be requested when a member’s cumulative income from the scheme has reached the level of one year’s salary of a senior staff administrator, such as a Board Director.

10. Performance indicators to be presented by the Council to the Australian Government would then, following the laboratory example of the research sciences, be collective. This would answer the problem arising from the long lead time often needed by individuals while their output finds its level, its audience, in order to be assessed for what it is worth (one remembers the furious outcry in Sydney over the design of the Opera House, the scandal at the expense, the public mocking of the architecture ... whereas now, all these years later, few Sydneysiders would tolerate a single tile being touched on those much-loved sails – public taste having caught up with the artistic vision). By accepting the *collective* output of each Wing, a fairly accurate indicator of performance would begin to emerge within a much shorter span than is practicable for each individual: perhaps 2-3 years.

Summary

The proposed expenditure of \$3.5 million to keep 350 artists off the breadline is:

- a negligible amount of less than 5% of Council's total discretionary budget from Government
- similar ballpark amount to that spent, for example, in 2003-2004 on 'suppliers' of services to Council (p.117 annual report), consultants and the like, \$2,751,000
- equivalent to the \$4,436,000 spent on Audience Development (another aspect of the dominance of the performing arts over the creative arts) in that same year. In 2002-2003 this amount was \$4,813,000.
- and moderate compared to the \$2,939,000 spent on the bureaucratic heartland of Policy Communications Research (p.118, annual report) – policy and planning which ought to be guided anyway by the non-staff peer panels.
- it would alleviate the pressure on the assessment panels and art form boards, whose allocations could then be dedicated to project funding, including new and rising artists.
- each Wing is too large and comprehensive for Council to be vulnerable to any accusation that it could become a coterie, or any criticism of its procedures for assessing projects by member artists – because there would be no assessment, simply the application of rules.

*please note that if the Australia Council continues to show a lack of interest in addressing this issue and resists putting such a program into effect, a future Labor Government could consider doing it directly through the ministry – the Wings Scheme requires no peer-assessment process, very little administration and is self-regulatory. In such a case, of course, an exchange of information with the appropriate Australia Council boards (similar to that which I am suggesting between Commonwealth and States) would be highly desirable.