Industry Paper

**Creative Australia: Missed opportunity or new paradigm for a national cultural policy?**

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**Keywords**
National cultural policy, government funding, patronage, national identity

**Abstract**

Creative Australia was released by the Labor government in March 2013 to general acclaim from the arts industry but little excitement beyond the citadel including the broader cultural industries. It was welcomed as bold but vulnerable, as a symbol of a new sense of national identity and confidence, as a celebration of cultural diversity, and as a driver of ‘economic prosperity and innovation’. While ambitious, will it make a difference? Did the policy offer a new agenda for arts and cultural policy in Australia? The election of a conservative Coalition government in September 2013 indicated that its implementation was unlikely. This commentary argues that Creative Australia amounted to no more than broad promises that spread the largesse too widely while still offering more of the same – reluctant government propping up of a sector that had failed to innovate in ways that might make it more independent and secure. Instead, the drip-feed of government funding remained the traditional policy approach. It tinkered rather than transformed the entrenched and self-referential enclave of cosseted talents that has traditionally defined the creative parameters of Australian national identity but expected ordinary Australians who eschew elite cultural forms to act as patrons once again.

**Biography**

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This commentary canvases three questions: What is the role of a national cultural policy? What does the Creative Australia policy process tell us about the agenda of cultural policy? If Creative Australia is not implemented in part or full, are there other options and visions for national cultural policy?

**What is the role of a national cultural policy?**

Then and now – from Creative Nation in 1994 to Creative Australia in 2013 – what has changed? Australia’s first national cultural policy, Creative Nation, was heralded as a bold vision for culture and gained significant attention at home and in other countries where it informed their cultural policies. However, the reality was that little of it was implemented as the government that delivered it was voted out in 1996. The same fate appears likely for the second such policy, Creative Australia, with the election of the Abbott Coalition government on 7 September, 2013. But this recurrent fate also raises the question as to why federal Labor governments wait until the eleventh hour to deliver broad-reaching policy statements near the end of their life?

Whereas Creative Nation resonated with the public, Creative Australia has virtually sunk without a trace – apart from among a few dedicated cultural commentators. Partly this is because it is an overly long and tortuous read which is something of a policy omnibus without offering anything distinctively new or exciting – or even a clear rationale. It has no author as such and appears to have been produced by a committee and bureaucratic machine and thus lacks, as Coalition Arts Spokesman George Brandis has observed, ‘thematic coherence’ (quoted by Westwood, 2013a).

This lack of cohesion is clear from the opening pages of the policy that initially conflate culture and the arts despite a prioritisation of the arts later in the document. The goals of the policy are 5: recognition of ATSI culture as at the heart of Australian identity; recognition of diversity as shaping identity; supporting excellence and ‘the special role of the artist’; enhancing the impact of culture on national wellbeing; and promoting digital cultural forms (Australian Government, 2013: 6). However, the themes of the policy are much narrower: modernising funding; endorsing the role of the artist; and enhancing the ‘social and economic dividend’ of culture.

Such bifurcation reproduces the ambivalence between arts and culture where broad-brush culture is now used to argue for the general benefit of cultural policy but – when push comes to shove – funding priorities are directed to the arts. So too with this policy where the very first policy initiative is to restructure the Australia Council for the Arts – historically the statutory body for supporting artists and whose policies and funding decisions have always been highly ambivalent about the rest of culture.

This overview of how the document is structured illustrates the problem with Creative Australia. Culture is leveraged to justify more of the same for the elite arts via funding arrangements that are merely an extension of existing arrangements or broadening the policy reach of ‘culture’ to assert its public value and role in national wellbeing. In sum, this national cultural policy promises both everything and nothing and largely reproduces the status quo and existing hierarchy of the elite arts citadel. As Mary Travers has concluded, the policy mounts to ‘more or less business as usual’ (Travers, 2013).
What does the Creative Australia policy process tell us about the agenda of cultural policy?

The development of this National Cultural Policy goes back to the 2020 Summit staged by Kevin Rudd on his election as Prime Minister in 2008 (Australia 2020, 2008). Culture was one of the policy think groups and its conduct reveals much about the policy process in this document. Despite wide-ranging discussion on day 1 of the summit, the summary document produced overnight reflected little of the views of the participants and instead was a document about the priorities of the arts and cultural elite (Australia 2020, 2008: 270). Perhaps because of disquiet among the participants, the document disappeared from public view shortly after the summit though later re-surfaced as a summary with the final report. However, few of the summit recommendations were adopted.

Instead, a series of think tanks, informal advisory groups and inquiries into aspects of art and culture fed into the development of the national cultural policy document. No authorship was acknowledged but the document was the result of collaboration between well-known lobbyists and advocacy groups whose positions had been widely canvassed. There was little input from evidence based policy or disinterested analysis. Much of the policy trajectory piggy-backed on existing schemes and policies. But some new ideas were included such as the immediately discredited Creative Young Stars program – described by Brandis as ‘egregious’ – which allocated $8.1 million to be distributed to young creatives through electorates and thus criticised as an electoral sweetener (Westwood, 2013a; Boland, 2013a).

Of more concern was the decision not only to retain the Australia Council – a body which arguably is past its use-by date and should be replaced with a more innovative, inclusive and accountable mechanism (Craik, 2007) – but to increase its funding and roles. This was a clear sign that nothing much had changed and that the self-referential, inward-looking arts bureaucracy remained well entrenched. Indeed, the Australia Council was ‘the biggest single beneficiary’ of Creative Australia (Boland, 2013b). The Council received an extra $75.3 million over five years – or $18 million a year of which $12 million was earmarked for ‘artists and arts organisations’, leaving just $1.5 million for the boards that distribute funds (Travers, 2013). By contrast, the Labor government committed $21 million to the onshore production of the populist film, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea! Meanwhile, the largest recipient of Australia Council largesse, the Major Performing Arts Organisations, had their funding consolidated, suggesting there was a certain schizophrenia among the government concerning what cultural policy might mean. As Travers puts it:

> Our cultural policy privileges western European heritage music above the extraordinary quality and diversity of music in Australia. Literature, visual arts and multimedia forms have similar stories. (Travers, 2013)

The appointment of ‘insider’ Tony Grybowski – previously executive director of the Major Performing Arts Board – as Australia Council CEO confirmed the continuation of a silo approach that shored up the status quo and the status of the Australia Council as the peak advocacy arts body (Boland, 2013b). The observation that the latest National Cultural Policy simply offered more of the same was confirmed by the recommendation to establish a Ministry of Culture to aggregate ‘all the areas of arts and cultural activity in one portfolio, under a Cabinet level minister’ in order ‘to find linkages between programs’ and ensure ‘measurable outcomes’ (Schultz, 2013: 6; Westwood, 2013b), a suggestion that was first mooted at the 2020 Summit (Australia 2020, 2008: 265).

Tellingly, this portfolio was envisaged as including a smorgasbord of ‘arts, sport, heritage, national collecting and training institutions, broadcasting, screen, tourism, [and] science’ with ‘strong links to education, industry, trade, foreign affairs, Indigenous, communities, immigration, regional affairs, digital economy, defence, and
health’ (Schultz, 2013: 8). Nonetheless, it would not ‘replicate’ the ‘Australia Council and Screen Australia that allocate funds’ (Schultz, 2013: 8). Sceptics might regard this as the ultimate evidence that broad-brush culture was being used as a smokescreen to prop up the elite arts sector once again. The rationale for this composite minority proposal was based on arguments about arguments about public good, cultural impact and national wellbeing, all old chestnuts from previous debates. In this document they are dressed up in the new rhetoric of ‘social dividend’ (Goldsmith, 2013).

If Creative Australia is not implemented in part or full, are there other options and visions for national cultural policy?

Given the current political context and economic challenges the nation faced in the wake of the GFC (largely exacerbated by the raft of rash, un-costed and unsustainable policy commitments and announcements by the Labor government), there seems little likelihood that many of the hundreds of initiatives signalled in Creative Australia will receive new or extra funding although policies within existing arrangements may well persist. As Goldsmith noted, ‘cultural policy is rarely seen as a critical vote changer’ and the belated release of the document in terms of the political cycle may prove to be its downfall (Goldsmith, 2013). Moreover, its fervent advocate, Simon Crean lost his portfolio within days of the release of the policy (and subsequently retired from politics) and its fate fell to new minister, Tony Burke, now relegated to the back bench. Burke’s problem was that he had little room to move because ‘he has inherited a policy already signed and sealed’ (Travers, 2013).

Post election, his Coalition successor – currently George Brandis – will have charge of implementation. Despite Burke’s contention that only Labor is committed to unleashing ‘the creative brilliance of Australians’ (Burke 2013), an econometric modelling of arts funding and government suggested that there was no consistent evidence of a correlation between political persuasion of the government and funding for the arts’ (MacNeill, Lye and Caulfield 2013: 1). However, ‘by the end of the Keating [Labor] Government, the arts were rhetorically associated with Labor: cultural practitioners were believed to be of left persuasion while left governments were perceived to endorse proactive arts and cultural policy’ (Craik 2007: 15).

In this context, Brandis announced an arts policy during the election campaign that ‘values the arts for their own sake – not as a cog in the wheel of other government priorities’ and values:

All art forms – the traditional canonical works as well as those on the leading edge of creativity and emerging art forms, and which seeks to make the arts accessible to all Australians, be they practitioners or audiences or gallery visitors – including the many millions who are not necessarily among the “arts establishments”, but whose appreciation of the best in our culture is not inferior to those who are (Brandis 2013b).

Whether and how this policy is enacted remains to be seen but it does appear to offer an inclusive strategy that recognises cultural practice ‘in the inner cities, the outer suburbs, the smaller states, the regions ... in equal measure’ (Brandis 2013b). In terms of mechanisms, the multiplicity of levels of government and types of strategies and programs cited in Creative Australia could form the basis of such a policy where the federal government might drive the architecture of funding but increasing portions are distributed through state and local government agencies and schemes. Such an approach would be a counter to the Labor top down approach to policy making and funding regimes that have reproduced the status quo and inertia of existing federal and national arts organisations that have relied on institutionalised and bureaucratised ways of doing things and effectively resisted or white-anted pressures for change.

As a study of performing arts in Queensland showed, the greatest innovation and value -for-money can be found in small to medium – often grassroots – organisations who prove to be more nimble and responsive to local cultures, communities and cultural priorities than well-funded and established larger organisations with the key factor in
success being organisations with visionary personal who acted as ‘movers and shakers’ (Lancaster et al. 2009). In this case, **bottom up** policy-making and local or community-based funding proved significantly more effective.

A further issue concerns the emphasis on ‘**joining the dots**’ and a ‘whole-of-government’ approach which has in the past slathered cultural policy across diverse portfolio areas with instrumental agendas (such as welfare, health and training) that have diluted the cultural dimension within a mix of instrumental and more critical policy agendas. The slippage between arts and culture has to date exacerbated this strategy with the ‘arts’ insulating themselves in arts **silos** while ‘culture’ has competed within multi-faceted organisations and portfolios.

The philosophy and priorities of elite arts and cultural policy have not changed fundamentally with this national cultural policy despite the length and diversity of the document. In particular, there was little evidence of new approaches to funding and support or sustainability of cultural sectors. The desire for increased philanthropy and partnership arrangements remains an article of faith. But there are few indications of likely mechanisms or incentives that would entice a reluctant private sector or community-based organisations to become involved - in particular tax breaks and incentives as proposed by Harold Mitchell in his review of private sector support for the arts (Mitchell, 2011).

**Creative Australia** is so cobbled together and convoluted that it was always unlikely to play the role of ‘enlightenment’ advocated by Belfiore and Bennett (2010: 139; cf. Belfiore, 2009). Perhaps the most promising basis for a more evidence-based national cultural policy that could transform the sector and policy frameworks of governments is the discussion paper published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to establish **Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts**. These would ‘measure the economic value of this segment of the economy; monitor its economic viability and reliance on volunteers and financial support from government; and understand its linkages to the rest of the economy’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013: 2).

By disaggregating cultural and creative activity into discrete components of the supply chain, occupations, industries, institutions, as well as market and non-market outputs of producers, a more informed understanding of the arts and cultural sectors could be established. This could then be used as the basis for a genuinely new approach to cultural policy that could inform new roles and functions for government and non-government agencies.

By challenging the stranglehold of elite arts over the current funding bodies and schemes, an **evidence-based** national cultural policy has the capacity to transform the policy parameters. It could shift direction away from propping up ‘inner-city elites’, as George Brandis has concluded, in favour of enhancing ‘ordinary culture and regional creative activity’. Brandis also argued that ‘Access is as important to cultural policy as the promotion of excellence through grants’ (quoted by Westwood, 2013a). To achieve this, a radically different mindset is required to drive ‘academic research and public policy that does not necessarily have to be mediated or shaped by an advocacy agenda’ (Belfiore and Bennett, 2010: 138).

**Conclusion**

**Creative Australia** illustrated not only the growth in the size and scope of the arts bureaucracy but its ability to exert influence as the key driver of cultural policy and arts funding. Its influence was exerted over the Gillard-Rudd Labor government from 2008-2013 just as it was over the Keating government in 1993-94 – often in both cases with the complicity of a submissive minister. This is clearly illustrated in sub-sectors such as Aboriginal art that now have ‘large funding agencies’ that ‘drive the continual dissemination’ of Aboriginal art:

the Australia Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth’s Office for the Arts and the subsidiary net of state and regional arts bodies active in various overlapping fields.
These bureaucrats coordinate their projects and they number in the hundreds. Far more people live off Aboriginal arts administration than off indigenous arts-making today and it has grown into a multiplicity business (Rothwell, 2013a: 15).

As artist, John Walker, has observed:

The government arts sector has developed such a widespread degree of circularity as to be like Narcissus and Echo, motionless and invisible; a hall of mirrors signifying nothing (quoted by Rothwell, 2013b: 15).

Rather, the structure of the sector has effectively acted as a gatekeeper of the production, consumption, curation and ultimately appreciation of Australia’s creative outputs and industries. This pernicious cycle needs challenging if a sustainable creative and cultural sector is to thrive in the national interest and incorporate the arts and culture of ordinary Australians as much as celebrating excellence, commercial success and international acclaim. Instead, arts and cultural policy needs to prioritise the importance of the popular engagement of Australians in culture for, as Rothwell has argued in relation to the future prospects for Australian indigenous art:

when local communities have a voice in the presentation of their culture, and can shape the way they meet the wiser world, hope for a constructive engagement still seems bright (Rothwell 2013c).

In short, Creative Australia was a lost opportunity to radically transform Australian culture. Only time will tell whether the incoming Coalition government will offer a new way to unleash the artistic and cultural expression of Australians and new direction for national culture.

References
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