

NPEA – MIA, Catalyst in Question; Arts funding back to the future? December 2015

It has been a turbulent year for the Arts and artists in Australia. First, the federal government slashed Australia Council's grants funding and announced the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA). The industry responded with a wave of national protests. The arts community was united and outraged. Senator Ludlum successfully called for a Senate Inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget Decisions on the Arts, which took submissions and held public hearings around the country. In the meantime, the new Minister scrapped the NPEA, partially reinstated funding to the Australia Council and unveiled his own Australian Arts and Culture Fund renamed Catalyst.

Yesterday, the Report of the Senate Inquiry was handed down, recommending, among other things, that the government restore to the Australia Council the full amount of the previous cuts, disband Catalyst and develop a coherent and clear arts policy for the sector.

Confused? You're in good company. Do the Senate Committee's recommendations sound remarkably similar to those of the industry? And, where was the problem that prompted such dramatic and urgent reform? Turns out there wasn't one.

The AWG has consistently lobbied for a coherent, well informed and clearly articulated arts policy that is transparent and well targeted to address cultural policy objectives and industry market gaps. We have made a submission to the Senate Inquiry and appeared before the Senators, articulating our evidence based position, supported by the findings of our Playwright's Survey.

We stressed that our stage and screen industries are not only at the heart of Australia's cultural identity, they are also a vital and dynamic growth sector in the international trade of intellectual property. We called for the funding priority in the Australian theatre sector to be directly and definably linked to the creation and presentation of new Australian works and the development and promotion of a cultural canon.

The AWG welcomes the Senate Report, with its familiar and encouraging findings. But it comes too late to feed into this round of Government decision-making. Arts Hub, in its summary of the findings says the Report 'will serve as a document to the most comprehensive re-mapping of Australia's cultural landscape for decades'. We certainly hope this is the case and we are incredibly proud of our art industry's response, which has been strong, united and exceptionally constructive.

We eagerly await the government's response and are looking forward to engaging with the new Minister on a funding model that supports the industry's unique challenges and reflects its contribution to the nation's cultural and economic wellbeing.