

1

Introduction

In the lead-up to the 2007 federal election Peter Garrett, then the Shadow Minister for the Arts, held meetings in Melbourne and Sydney to hear what artists had to say and to outline the Labor Party's new ideas about cultural policy. After eleven years of the one federal government, it was probably right to assume that the arts community would be keen to talk, and to hear about opportunities for a fresh approach. At the Melbourne meeting, held at the Trades Hall in Carlton, Garrett foreshadowed some prospective initiatives, and then the floor was thrown open for questions and comments. By far the most memorable of these came from the Indigenous director and writer Wesley Enoch, who took the floor and told those assembled that it was time for the arts to show society a way forward, and that the Indigenous arts offered such vision and leadership. Cultural, political and social leadership, Enoch argued, are all manifested in contemporary Indigenous arts practices. To tremendous applause, Enoch urged Garrett to sit down and talk with him about how the arts can show the way,

about how important the arts are for the health and vitality of a community. Come, you need to talk to me, Enoch urged, and find out how Indigenous arts are at the forefront of this understanding. You need to talk to me, he said, about how Indigenous arts are leading the way.

In part, the impetus for this essay came from our growing awareness of just how significant has been the contribution of Indigenous artists to the cultural life of Australia. Artists like Stephen Page, Wesley Enoch, Wayne Blair, Leah Purcell, Rhoda Roberts, Deborah Mailman, Rachael Maza Long, David Milroy, Andrea James, Kylie Belling, David Page and Sam Watson are leaders in their fields. Nor has this been easily achieved. The current generation of Indigenous performers and theatre makers are notably the beneficiaries of almost eighteen years of dedicated cultural policy which has facilitated the funding of Indigenous performing arts companies and many hundreds of projects around the country.

So our inquiry began as a question: What has been the impact of cultural policy on Indigenous performing arts? It has not been a simple top-down process whereby policy begets practice. Rather, we think of it as a conversation, a two-way exchange between artists and funding agencies, each responding to the other in a dialogue which develops over many years. Stephen Page, artistic director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, describes the relationship between artists and funding agencies as a process that ‘works both ways: they set up an agenda about the same time

you're going along with your own cultural [and] creative agenda'. So, what has this mutual and inter-related activity—this conversation between artists and policy makers—produced in eighteen years? What we have discovered, to some extent, affirms Enoch's claim that Indigenous artists are generators of change. The sector is dynamic and some of its artists are providing leadership in intercultural dialogue and provoking a conversation we need to have about the social and cultural value of the arts. This essay is an account of the perceptions of a group of artists about the effects of public policies on them and their profession, and their views about the current and future needs of the sector.

There is no uniform set of views about either the purpose or reach of Indigenous performing arts. Our interviewees represented diverse positions on a range of critical issues. That such a diversity of opinion exists is no surprise, given that Indigenous communities are geographically and culturally diverse. Australian Indigenous communities do not share a common language—unlike, for example, Indigenous New Zealanders—and there are many separately identifiable cultural traditions within Australia. As one of our interviewees, Lydia Miller from the Australia Council, said: 'There were five hundred nations. We're dealing with Europe.' We do not suggest that the diversity of views we have identified is new, but its significance is heightened by the moment. Federal cultural policies are in the process of review, making it an important time to assess issues stemming from this diversity.