

Introduction

It does not take much to get the arts onto the front pages of every newspaper and into the public debate across the nation. A prepubescent nipple in a Bill Henson photograph and the subsequent trashing by the Prime Minister of the work of one of Australia's most internationally-respected artists is all it takes. So is a photograph of the same prime minister, armed with flowers, at the maternal bedside of one of our most luminescent stars—while his Labor Party colleagues are paying their respects at the funeral of one of their most beloved stalwarts. Court proceedings are always good for a headline: disputes over the awarding of an Archibald Prize or attempts by Church groups to revive laws about blasphemy so as to ban a play or a film.

For the more economically-minded, perhaps it is the news that yet another record price has been paid for a painting bought or sold in Australia.¹ It's hard to forget the public outcry when the Whitlam Government paid over \$1 million for *Blue Poles*—in light of the painting's current value, perhaps the most fiscally responsible decision that government ever made.

Then, of course, there are the human stories: how the Poms gave Ross Stretton such a horrible time at the Royal Ballet, not, heaven forbid, because he was finding it too hard to manage, but because he was

only a 'colonial'.² And, at the end of the day, there will always be headlines about another star/potential star found dead of an overdose of legal/illicit drugs, or some other moron's boorish behaviour on yet another mindless reality TV show, followed by a prime ministerial denunciation and threats to change broadcasting standards.

Despite the fine body of arts writers, critics, analysts and commentators which Australia can boast, despite the high level of academic and intellectual study in both our universities and ever-declining ranks of serious journals; despite the unbounded talents of our arts practitioners themselves, the engendering of serious public debate about the arts and about arts funding is an almost impossible task in our contemporary community.

This essay will concentrate on a single aspect of this public debate: the public funding of the performing arts and, in particular, the provision of public funds through one-off political or parliamentary initiatives, or else the funding of the Australia Council. *It asks both how and why these funding decisions were made and, above all, who has influenced their making.*

My thesis will be that the levels of support for the arts and the development of initiatives and new directions are a function not of public demand for the arts or the products of the arts industry (loosely defined), and that they are certainly not a function of the advocacy role or skills of Australian arts professionals or practitioners. Rather, it will be argued, the critical factors have been the *personal* support lent by senior political leaders, prominent and well-connected

business leaders, or senior bureaucrats with a interest in particular art forms.

It may well be said that in this context the survival and growth of the arts sector in Australia is essentially dependent upon the kindness of strangers.

Consequently, what I want to explore in these pages is the question of how to find the right strangers. Where are they lurking and how do we entice them out of their lairs? What can they do when they do emerge and what is the cost of such an exercise?

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Making policy

Arts policy in Australia, or rather policy about selective issues in the arts, has always been made in the absence of a national arts strategy or policy. Whether or not this is a good thing is open to debate.

In an earlier Platform Paper David Throsby asked whether Australia needs a cultural policy. His conclusion was to reject the idea of a ‘magisterial cultural statement’ imposed from above by a prime minister, cabinet or parliament, and to support ‘the opening up of a broad-ranging discussion about the role of the arts and culture in our society, and the forging of a new cultural accord between government and people’.³