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THE CONVERSATION

Philosophy vs evidence is no way to orchestrate cultural policy

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The evidence of cultural consumption and production in Australia does not bear out the claims made by Senator Brandis. AAP Image/Mick Tsikas

Australia's cultural sector has been shellshocked by the May budget's **dramatic changes** to arts funding arrangements. Arts Minister George Brandis says he will end "arts mediocrity" by slashing more than A\$100 million from the **Australia Council** and reassigning the funds to a **National Programme for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA)**.

Citing the precedent of the **Australian Festival of Chamber Music**, Senator Brandis intends NPEA to be a "contestable" funding option for organisations or individuals who are not funded by the **Australia Council**.

But when Labor's Jacinta Collins questioned Brandis during **Senate Estimates** on Wednesday about what evidence actually supports the establishment of this new discretionary fund, he could offer only a "philosophy" (or two):

This is, I think, when you say what evidence is there, a decision based on a philosophy of governance and a philosophy of the way in which arts funding ought to be administered.

Brandis also admitted he had concerns about various individual funding decisions, even referring to a list of grants criticised in recent days by News Corporation columnists Tim Blair and Andrew Bolt.

Performance measures

So what evidence is there for understanding the Australia Council's funding decisions over, say, the past decade?

There is actually a considerable evidence base from which to form policy decisions in Australian arts funding. Both the **Australian Bureau of Statistics** and the Australia Council itself collect large amounts of robust data on cultural audiences, cultural events and the output of artists and companies funded by the taxpayer.

One crucial metric of cultural funding is innovation, such as the production of new Australian artworks. Supporting the creation of new Australian product has long been a rationale for cultural decision making. The Australia Council has developed a complex model it calls "artistic vibrancy" that explains how it approaches the difficult task of judging the merit of a particular company or work.

Another available metric is audience numbers: "bums on seats", as producers like to say. Indeed, in Senate Estimates on Wednesday, Minister Brandis used "the audience" as a rationale for the establishment of NPEA:

As I have always said, one of my misgivings about the exclusive peer-to-peer funding model is: who represents the audience around the table? The minister, being the responsible officer in charge of taxpayers' money, has to be the voice for audiences. What are the shows, what are the performances, what are the concerts that the audiences go to?

In answer to his own question, Brandis argued that the major performing arts companies "provide the performances that the great audiences of Australia enjoy".

What does the evidence say?

In terms of audience numbers, Minister Brandis is on rather shaky ground. The ABS data tells us that the sorts of things that the major performing arts companies produce – theatre, classical music and dance – are amongst the least attended types of cultural events.

The most popular remains going to the movies, as it has been for decades. Zoos, botanic gardens, art galleries and contemporary music concerts are all more popular than opera, classical music, ballet and mainstage theatre.

Even on an individual company basis, it's not clear that the major performing arts companies are putting on "the performances that the great audiences of Australia enjoy". **Opera Australia**, our largest performing arts company, sold 539,197 tickets in 2014. The **Melbourne International Comedy Festival** (which receives no federal funding) sold more than 630,000.

The 2012 Victorian Live Music Census estimated more than 14 million patron visits to small Melbourne music venues in that year.

What about artistic vibrancy? Australia Council data allows us to compare the amount of new Australian work that major companies and the so-called “small-to-medium” sector produce.

Total works by smaller companies

Key Organisations	2010	2011	2012	TOTALS
Theatre	212	306	381	899
Dance	110	124	112	346
Music	402	389	398	1,189
Smaller orchestras	--	64	6	70
YEARLY TOTALS	724	883	897	2,504

Note: Key Organisations comprise of 148 small to medium sized arts organisations that receive funding from the Australia Council.

Source: Author provided from Australia Council data [Get the data](#)

Total works by major companies

Major Companies	2010	2011	2012	TOTALS
Orchestras	117	97	110	324
Other Majors	285	293	288	866
YEARLY TOTALS	402	390	398	1,190

Note: Major Companies are the 28 major performing arts organisations that are funded by the states and the commonwealth.

Source: Author provided from Australia Council data [Get the data](#)

New works by smaller organisations

Key Organisations	2010	2011	2012	TOTALS
Theatre	95	127	167	389
Dance	62	51	42	155
Music	76	96	121	293
Smaller orchestras	--	26	4	30
YEARLY TOTALS	233	300	334	867

Note: Key Organisations comprise of 148 small to medium sized arts organisations that receive funding from the Australia Council.

Source: Author provided from Australia Council data [Get the data](#)

New works by major companies

Major Companies	2010	2011	2012	TOTALS
Orchestras	21	24	20	65
Other Majors	67	79	88	234
YEARLY TOTALS	88	103	108	299

Note: Major Companies are the 28 major performing arts organisations that are funded by the states and the commonwealth.

Source: Author provided from Australia Council data [Get the data](#)

This data shows unequivocally that the smaller companies produce more new Australian works than the majors. They punch well above their weight when it comes to artistic innovation as measured by new work.

While major companies do make a contribution to artistic vibrancy, the data in the above table suggests that major companies are not really providing a national infrastructure for new works. Australia's major orchestras, in particular, continue to perform a repertoire based on 18th- and 19th-century European composers. In contrast to these well-funded covers bands, it is the small to medium sector that is producing the majority of the new Australian work in the performing arts ecology.

This won't be a surprise to Senator Brandis. Back in 2007 he announced an increase in funding for small to medium arts companies precisely because of the "vital role" they played in the sector.

Unfortunately, the 2015 budget will punish the smaller companies supported by the Australia Council with deep funding cuts, while the major performing arts companies continue to have their funding guaranteed. Indeed, the majors could even benefit at the expense of smaller companies, by accessing extra funding from the new excellence program.

The collected evidence of cultural consumption and production in Australia does not bear out the rationale proposed by Senator Brandis for the establishment of a new National Programme for Excellence in the Arts.

If we designed a cultural policy based on the available evidence, it would certainly look very different than the vision announced in the budget. But there is evidence available, if we wish to use it. While we neglect it, cultural policy is much more likely to remain beholden to the whims of individual arts ministers, and their personal definitions of “excellence.”

What Australian cultural policy urgently needs is a philosophy for evidence, not Senator Brandis’s “philosophy versus evidence”.



ABS

Arts funding

Arts policy

George Brandis

Australia Council

Federal Budget 2015

National Programme for Excellence in the Arts