



3 April 2013

Senate Committee
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Australian Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Committee

Re: Australia Council Bill 2013

Regional Arts NSW (RANSW), the peak body and support agency for arts and cultural development in regional NSW, would like to comment on aspects of the Australia Council Bill 2013, particularly the revised functions of the Australia Council and the implications of these significant changes.

As a state wide organisation that supports activity and manages devolved funding programs promoting sustainable cultural development through community engagement in the arts, we are most concerned that the Australia Council has narrowed its focus to excellence in arts practice and the development of markets and audiences. The reasons for this concern are as follows:

- As the Australian Government's primary funding body for the arts, this represents a limited view by the Australia Council of the benefits of the arts to society as a whole, especially in the context of the broad goals of the Labor Government's recently launched National Cultural Policy *Creative Australia*;
- By excluding the functions from the old Act "to provide, and encourage the provision of opportunities for persons to practise the arts; to promote the general application of the arts in the community; to foster the expression of a national identity by means of the arts; and to uphold and promote the right of persons to freedom in the practice of the arts", the Australia Council has distanced itself from any responsibility relating to the rights of citizens to cultural participation and cultural expression and/or a commitment to assisting citizens as creators;
- Whilst striving for excellence and developing markets and audiences is worthwhile, it is essentially supply-driven and does not address demand or the rights of citizens to engage in expression of their own culture without the 'excellence' label;
- As stated in RANSW's response to the Australia Council Review submitted in June 2012, the notion of 'excellence' runs the risk of appearing exclusive and elitist and eliciting differences in interpretation that will be problematic for policy-makers, grant assessors and community grant seekers, to name but a few. It is expected that the requirement for excellence will preclude many grant-seekers from submitting applications to Australia Council programs;

- Under the revised functions the significant amount of new Federal funding recently directed to the Australia Council will be skewed towards 'excellence' to the detriment of participation and access. This was also a comment in RANSW's response to the Australia Council Review, but made with the hope that a more balanced approach of funding allocation towards 'excellence' and 'access' would be considered. This does not seem to have happened and, to our knowledge, no new money has been directed towards programs promoting access and participation. The funding level for the Regional Arts Fund, one of the devolved funding programs managed by RANSW in this state, is at the same level as its instigation in 2001, despite the well-documented success of the program in regional Australia and its significant contribution to Australia's cultural landscape;
- It is difficult to reconcile the revision of the functions of the Australia Council with the vision of the Labor Government's National Cultural Policy *Creative Australia* and its intention of ensuring that the cultural sector 'has the skills, resources, and resilience to play an active role in Australia's future.' The revised Australia Council functions do not address core goals of *Creative Australia*, notably the 'centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to the uniqueness of Australian identity', nor 'that all citizens, wherever they live, whatever their background or circumstances, have a right to shape our cultural identity and expression' nor 'strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to national life, community wellbeing and the economy'. It would be expected that our primary funding body for the arts would have responsibility for these areas and, if not, this responsibility (and appropriate level of support and assistance) at least be vested elsewhere.

It is hoped that the above concerns will be taken into consideration in the development of the Australia Council legislation.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Rogers
CEO, Regional Arts NSW