

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Spill-Over Hearing March 2017

Communications Portfolio

Australia Council

Question No: 260

Australia Council

Hansard Ref: Pages 6-7, 24/03/2017

Topic: Return of Funds

Senator Bilyk, Catryna asked:

Senator FIFIELD: I am assuming that the answer that you have there was a statement at the time as to whether the government had made a decision to return further funds, which—

Senator BILYK: It was about whether you were planning to return funds.

Senator FIFIELD: That is right. Governments have either made decisions or they have not made decisions and, before they have made decisions, you cannot say that the government is planning to do something, because it is not the case until a decision has actually been made. So that was a statement just reflecting the policy at the time. I am sure—

Senator BILYK: So when was the decision made?

Senator FIFIELD: I will have to check on the precise date that the decision was taken. Officers at the table may be able to assist, but they are internal decision-making processes of government and there certainly would have been a date. We can take that on notice, if officers at the table cannot. So we are happy to do that.

CHAIR: Just further on that, Minister, can you let us know, with these changes, what consultation occurred prior to the decision being made?

Senator FIFIELD: Happy to, and this might also partly go to what is behind Senator Bilyk's question. When I became the minister, the government had already announced in the budget in 2015 that there would be created a new program called the National Program for Excellence in the Arts. That had not yet been established when I came into the portfolio. I said to the sector that I would have a look at that situation. As a result, I renamed the program Catalyst, refocused it and also returned \$32 million over the forward estimates to the Australia Council.

At that time, I also said that I would continue to review the program. I am not someone who feels proprietorial about what ifs and, if something can be done better, I am very much open to that. I said that I would continue to examine the program. I did that. I spoke to many different parts of the sector, both formally and informally, and I reached the conclusion after the operation of Catalyst that it was appropriate to defer the rebalance and return the additional funds to the Australia Council.

CHAIR: Mr Grybowski, do you have any additional information for the committee on consultation?

Mr Grybowski: As the Australian government's funding and advisory body, we are in very regular communication and contact with the minister, the minister's office and his department. So throughout that period there were numerous conversations, obviously about funding and investment in the arts but more broadly about issues that we are observing across the sector.

Senator Fifield: Again, it is fair to say this is a sector that is very willing to give its views and that does not need encouragement to give its views. That is something that I have found very helpful as the minister.

CHAIR: So this was not a surprise to anybody.

Senator BILYK: I think it was a surprise to Senator Brandis, but I accept that it was not to Senator Fifield.

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Senator FIFIELD: I should have mentioned that obviously I consulted very closely with the Australia Council and also with my department.

Senator BILYK: Thanks, Minister. Getting back to the issue about when the decision was made to restore the funding, you will take that on notice?

Senator FIFIELD: Certainly.

Answer:

The Government's decision was taken in the budget context and therefore no further information can be provided.