

# Government attacks nation's public culture

Jakubowicz, Andrew "Government attacks nation's public culture: Multicultural arts to disappear under new regime?" Infocus (Ethnic Communities' Council of New South Wales), 19(3), 1996, pp13-14.

## Multicultural arts to disappear under new regime?

by Andrew Jakubowicz

The Treasurer told the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to zero multiculturalism in the Budget. The Budget papers for the Ministry for Communications and the Arts contain nothing on it - and the Australia Council was already feeling the new political correctness when it decided to drop Multicultural Arts as a priority policy area in 1995. Along with many other areas of the multicultural project in Australia, multicultural arts have been jettisoned from the mainstream of Australian cultural policy by the Coalition government.

In a careful if unreflective (and even worse if unconscious) strategy of demolition, a series of crucial Government decisions leave the multicultural arts foundering and the future of a diverse Australian cultural scene in peril. As many have noted, in this Budget the devil is in the detail, or rather, the lack of it.

Though the warnings were clear for us all in the Coalition's policy statement "For Art's Sake: A fair go for all - for all of us" - Senator Alston, now Arts and Communications supremo, was incoherent on the issue prior to the election, naming the extension of SBS as the only initiative he could identify as relating to multicultural arts.

The Coalition Arts Policy is an extensive document which specifically notes its concerns

for Indigenous cultural development (and commercialisation). Yet the word "multicultural" appears nowhere in the document, and there is no sense that the policy conceives of Australia as a culturally diverse society. Rather there is a simplistic and limited view of government support for the arts which is framed by the term "artistic excellence".

"Excellence" is a controversial term - some read it as code for "Anglo-Australian mainstream values". Indeed in the past there was recognition that the capacity to judge excellence and thus support and reward it, was a function of the life experience, education and socialisation of the audience/reviewer. If you do not understand Indian dance, you can hardly judge a good or bad example of it.

Thus in places like the Australia Council, the need was identified some time ago for a diversity of "judges" with widespread skills and experience. This was being worked towards through policies which would ensure people from ethnic backgrounds would be on all Boards (now Funds) and on the Council, and an extensive culturally diverse membership would be part of the new Peer Panels.

In 1995 the Council's own Multicultural Advisory Committee voiced its concern at the then downgrading of the multicultural policy, and it argued for the importance of more people of culturally diverse backgrounds on Boards and the Council itself, to spread the load of informed advocacy.

The Committee was given an undertaking from the Chair, Hilary McPhee, that the Council was fully committed to its Arts for a Multicultural Australia Policy, and would take on the action plan proposed by the Committee, including at least two people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds on the Council and each of

the Funds.

A year on, there is no sign of any action by the Council bureaucracy (irrespective of the Government's own anti-multicultural agenda or, on the other hand, the affirmation of the importance of the multicultural policy by Council members themselves). Many people are asking whether it is possible for the Council to implement its own commitments to multiculturalism, given the pressure to protect the national icon companies, and whether cuts to the administration will allow resources to go into building the Council-wide strategy that is crucial for the future.

Wherever it can, the new Government has seemed to have halted implementation of a multicultural agenda for the arts. Despite strong Council argument for a person of culturally diverse background on every Fund and on the Council itself, Minister Alston has refused to abide by accepted practice.

In the crucial areas of Theatre and Literature he has appointed Australians who are not from culturally diverse backgrounds to Funds where everyone is from the same background. There is dispute as to whether this is the consequence of a government agenda, or not. Senator Alston's adviser on the arts, Fiona Polletti, argues that a great deal is still being done, and that any change in appointment practice is "certainly not an agenda, but the appointment of the best person for the job". The new Council positions all went to Australians not from culturally diverse backgrounds, with the sole surviving "ethnic" Lex Marinos, Chair of the Community Cultural Development Fund (CCDF) (with its three members who are from culturally diverse backgrounds).

Marinos is expected to carry both the CCDF and the Arts for a Multicultural Australia agendas - chair his own Fund and the Arts for a Multicultural Australia Advisory Committee. It is likely that the action plan previously agreed to by the Council will be seriously truncated, with the 6% cut to the Council being taken up in crucial areas such as advocacy. Funding will be

protected to the major organisations such as the Australian Ballet, and the Sydney Theatre Company, few of which have a strong record in arts for a multicultural Australia.

In Canberra the Department of Communications and the Arts, never a hotbed of creativity in relation to multicultural arts, has already found it is easier to abandon any such concerns. Finance has said quite clearly that if initiatives are not in the Coalition policy, they will not even be considered. Indeed the Communications area with moderate increases for elements of SBS radio reach and Multicultural Broadcasting, when taken with Alston's condemnation of the ABC as "too multicultural", suggests that the new Government sees multiculturalism as a marginal activity for non-English speakers, something quite apart from the real mainstream which is to be protected from its malevolent influences.

Multicultural Arts practitioners and supporters of a culturally diverse arts scene were hoping that the long awaited Cultural Ministers' Council meeting in December would provide a venue for action on the National Agenda for Multicultural Arts (The 1991 Big Picture) one of the long-delayed outcomes of the 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia process. It is unlikely that either Alston's office or Department bureaucrats will be anxious to have this matter on the agenda.

The future prospect is dangerous, with the hitherto burgeoning multicultural arts field facing major attacks. Employment opportunities for artists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and cultural experiences for the wider community will be reduced - particularly in the area of community cultural development which is not mentioned at all in the Coalition policy.

With only one member out of twelve on the Australia Council with a background in multicultural arts, and the new political correctness (i.e. multiculturalism is not mainstream Australia, says Prime Minister Howard), we are likely to see a major rolling

back of those elements of the arts scene that have made Australia a more interesting, stimulating, cosmopolitan and exciting place.

That after all, may be what the Prime Minister and his Culture Minister want.

*Andrew Jakubowicz was deputy chair of the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council (1993-1996). He teaches at the University of Technology, Sydney.*