

Friday essay: Silver-tongued Turnbull fails to woo the arts vote

Written by The Conversation USA

In May 2015, the Australian arts community was shocked, perplexed and bemused when the then Arts Minister and Attorney-General, George Brandis, raided the government's allocation to its own professional funding body, the Australia Council, and [withdrew A\\$104.7 million](#) to create his own private slush fund, the [National Program for Excellence in the Arts](#).

The raid had all the drama and high farce that accompanied another attorney-general's raid on his own department, back in 1973. Then, national security was at stake, but here it was a petty power grab.

While some people may be critical of the Australia Council, myself included, Brandis's move was arrogant, ill-conceived and foolhardy. His [justification in the media release announcing the NPEA](#) was transparently inaccurate and mischievous:

Arts funding has until now been limited almost exclusively to projects favoured by the Australia Council. The National Programme for Excellence in the Arts will make funding available to a wider range of arts companies and arts practitioners, while at the same time respecting the preferences and tastes of Australia's audiences.

Secrecy surrounded the Brandis move, with the Australia Council informed of the cuts only a few hours before they were announced in the treasurer's budget speech. Here the Abbott Government also [slashed the allocations to Canberra's cultural institutions](#). Brandis was subsequently [roundly condemned in the arts community](#) for his cowboy politics.

Although Brandis was dumped as arts minister in the leadership coup and the new minister, Senator Mitch Fifield, [returned A\\$32 million to the Australia Council coffers](#), the damage had already been done.

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Much of the Australia Council funds were frozen for allocations to the major players in the performing arts sector. It is the smaller to medium size operations that have been forced to carry, and will continue to carry, the brunt of these cuts.

Arts programs, including youth theatre and fringe festivals, have been curtailed or have collapsed, jobs have been lost in the arts sector and a Senate enquiry uncovered [something of the depth of the carnage and the passions unleashed](#)

Hopes were high when Malcolm Turnbull became Prime Minister in September, but Turnbull failed his first test of leadership with the arts community. Rather than reversing completely the Brandis folly, the new slush fund was [renamed a Catalyst Fund](#) . It is designed to duplicate the activities of the Australia Council, but now controlled by a government oligarchy.

While the Australian arts community was still reeling from the Brandis folly, Turnbull's government dealt a second body blow to the arts and artists as a pre-Christmas present in its December 2015-2016 [Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook budget update](#) .

The government announced further cuts of A\$52.5 million to the arts sector over the next four years – as part of a process of increasing its “efficiency dividend”. These especially targetted national cultural institutions and the Australian film industry.

Screen Australia was crippled with an additional A\$10.3 million cut to its budget over the next four years, at the same time as the Federal Government diverted A\$47.3 million to Hollywood studios to bring popular commercial productions to Australia.

[The Book Council of Australia](#) , one of the very few cultural initiatives by the Abbott Government, was also [promptly scrapped after only three months](#) with barely enough time to print the new letterhead paper.

The efficiency dividend

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The [efficiency dividend](#) , an annual cut to the funding of Commonwealth government agencies, was introduced by the Hawke Government as an emergency measure in September 1986 at the level of 1.25% a year for three years, commencing 1987-88.

This temporary emergency measure has now been in place for more than 25 years and despite several reviews [demonstrating](#) its [shortcomings](#) , governments have remained addicted to it.

Against the unambiguous advice of the reviews, the Rudd Government increased the efficiency dividend to 2.25 per cent in 2013. The Abbott Government, against further advice and its own commission of audit, then increased it to 2.5 per cent.

Nine Commonwealth government agencies have full or partial exemptions from the efficiency dividend, including most of the Department of Defence, but the arts are not amongst the chosen few. The Australia Council cops the whole efficiency dividend cut, except for its multi-year appropriations for the Major Performing Arts organisations.

There is no relief for the national cultural institutions, which have been caught in the vicious cycle of being required to do more with less for a couple of generations.

The problem is that you cannot compare the National Gallery of Australia or the National Library of Australia with a huge organisation like the Department of Health, the Department of Finance or the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Size does matter. Economies of scale do not work in a relatively small organisation with a few hundred staff. It can be crippled by a loss of ten colleagues, which would be more readily absorbed within a staff of thousands.

In the 2011-12 Budget, the efficiency dividend was applied at the portfolio ministerial level. This gave ministers the flexibility to vary the impact of the cuts on the various agencies in their departments.

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This proved particularly necessary when governments applied additional single-year imposts on top of the base level. In 2012-13, for instance, the rate of the efficiency dividend went up to 4 per cent.

Simon Crean, the last Labor Arts Minister, used his ministerial discretion to prevent the 2012-13 impost from applying to various organisations. They included the:

- Australian National Maritime Museum;
- National Gallery of Australia;
- National Museum of Australia;
- National Library of Australia;
- Australia Council for the Arts;
- Australian Film Television and Radio School;
- National Film and Sound Archive;
- National Archives of Australia;
- Old Parliament House (Museum of Australian Democracy);
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies;
- Australian War Memorial and the Torres Strait Regional Authority
- and Screen Australia.

This move was [widely applauded](#) within the arts community.

Here comes the new boss, worse than the old boss

Few expected the Turnbull Government to be worse for the arts than the Abbott one, but it is.

The effect of its first mid-year budget update and its new efficiency dividends for the next four years will cripple the federally funded cultural institutions. Such cuts are not sustainable and operations and functions of the national cultural institutions stand to be affected, in some cases irreversibly.

The National Library faces a A\$6 million cut, the National Museum of Australia a A\$5 million cut, the National Gallery a A\$4 million cut, the National Film and Sound Archive a A\$3 million cut and the National Portrait Gallery a reduction of over A\$0.5 million, as well as a smaller cut to the Museum of Australian Democracy in Old Parliament House.

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The Australian National Maritime Museum also faces [a substantial cut](#) .

Through a strange roll of the dice, the Australian War Memorial, with former Liberal Party minister Brendan Nelson at the helm, has been spared and survives within the safety of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Most of the national cultural institutions will now face cuts to their staffing. Public outreach will be restricted and this new 3 per cent efficiency dividend will prevent the major cultural institutions from meeting their legislative obligation to grow and develop collections.

The arts sector is in crisis and while many had hoped the Turnbull Government would mark a new enlightened beginning, this has not eventuated.

As a public speaker at arts events, Prime Minister Turnbull does not provide the embarrassing spectacle of his predecessor – the cringe factor has eased.

Turnbull has appeared on stage with charm, eloquence and erudition in the past few months to speak at the National Gallery, the National Library and at the National Portrait Gallery. Yet all of this accumulated cultural capital was instantly undone in the mid-year budget cuts and in his inability to restore full funding to the Australia Council.

It is foolhardy for any government to attack most of the arts community, as you are attacking a network affecting millions of people.

Australians love the arts and Australians vote. While the Turnbull government may, in the next May Budget, splash some dollars for major bricks and mortar arts projects in Melbourne and Sydney, the damage has already been done. I assume that in the past couple of months much of the Australian arts community has already made up its mind and will vote Labor, again.

It remains a mystery as to why the Turnbull Government wants to return to the culture wars. We

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had all hoped that the new prime minister and the new arts minister would be better than their predecessors, but we were wrong.

The arts sector in Australia is more depressed than it has been for many decades. At a time when even [the Melbourne Art Fair has been cancelled this year](#) as insufficient commercial art galleries can afford to participate, the Turnbull Government continues to kick the arts community in the guts.

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