

In Adelaide on Tuesday, a hundred-plus arts practitioners of different backgrounds rallied on the steps of Parliament House to protest one thing they all have in common: poor future prospects.

In the lead up to the South Australian state budget, the jungle drums are ominous. [Cuts are predicted](#) and according to the ABC, the government wants to reduce funding over the next three years by about \$8.5 million per annum. Though no one knows exactly how deep they will bite, what is certain is that they will arrive when many small organisations are already bleeding and will have a devastating effect on the arts ecology of SA as whole.

To rub the salt into the wound, the rally took place on the day the Victorian government announced it will be [investing \\$115 million](#) over four years into its own arts sector in a new comprehensive Creative Industries Strategy.

The contrast is unmissable – and depressing. In the words of South Australian composer and musician Ross McHenry,

The combination of state and federal cuts mean we will inevitably be living in a city with a smaller arts sector... and this will... mean [fewer] jobs, less new work, and less support for artists. It will mean that many brilliant people are forced to look elsewhere for work... This will be happen across the board but the cuts will be felt acutely by emerging artists and arts workers who will be forced to seek work in other states, contributing to the already significant brain drain we experience in South Australia. The cultural deficit will be felt for generations and even restoring funding, won't fix the problem when the state's cultural leaders don't live here anymore.

Modern economies don't so much develop as metastasize. Extracting a meaningful narrative from the daily wash of economic data is like fishing for your house keys down a storm water drain. The sassy graphs of Alan Kohler and the editorials of the Financial Review try to make sense of the senseless. But what does it all mean? And who takes responsibility when people's jobs end up in a box next to the trash?

The arts are part of the economy. Most of the time those working in the sector don't need to think beyond their own immediate needs. That's OK. Not everything is about money. Or rather, there are things that are less about making money than putting it to good use. Being entrepreneurial in the tech sector is where you earn your fortune. Being entrepreneurial in the arts is where you earn your rent.

But sometimes, like Arnie in *The Terminator*, the broader economic reality crashes through. One such occasion was Senator Brandis's savage cuts to the Australia Council last year. This derailed the Council's 2014 strategic plan (which as Minister for the Arts he had endorsed), scuppered its new six-year reporting cycle, and sent small arts organisations around the nation into intensive care. Born out of prejudice, conducted in ire, the Senator's actions continue to have a deleterious effect today.

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp for people not in the arts is how tiny fluctuations in minuscule amounts of grant money can have such profound consequences. At the rally, it was pointed out that the arts in South Australia receive just 1.5% of government spending, and small arts organisations just 2% of that.

You can argue the toss, but not the size of the coin. The money most Australian governments spend on the arts is chump change.

If the SA cuts go ahead, and if the federal government gets into the act by slating more of their own, the South Australian arts sector will be in what pundits call unknown waters. Two questions then loom. First, what will happen next? Second, how did it come to this?

Let's take the second, more confronting, question first. Support for the arts is widely distributed, but weak. Asked to choose between a new hospital and a new gallery, it is easy to guess which way community preferences would fall.

The job of governments is to both make decisions about incommensurable outcomes and to avoid them. They are, at best, a necessary evil. A better approach is to manage the allocation of scarce resources such that terminal results are precluded except where obviously required.

When ideology subsumes good policy-making, as it did with Senator Brandis, this wisdom goes south. The big economic picture then arrives to complicate everyone's lives. As financial columnists have recently been saying, aggregate demand is depressed. The economy could be growing at a faster rate, but it is not – because the wealth we are generating is not translating into higher wages.

So households are saving rather than spending, while the entrepreneurial go-getters Australia decided to foster by lowering taxes in the 1980s look like a new rentier class, their cash locked up on bond markets or overseas.

Spare a thought for SA Premier Jay Weatherill then, a fustian man not given to the oleaginous weasling of our Prime Minister. He's caught in a perfect storm of long-term forces. And both leaders are stymied by the Right of the Liberal Party, a cantankerous group of one-eyed "dries" still living the Cold War in their heads who see any mooted increase in taxation as red-rag socialism.

What will happen next? The choices the SA government face are between worse and worser. Still there is always room to move. It is important the government is clear about its own position, and protective of the sector it has in its sights. It is dealing with a much-abused cohort starting to lose its mojo.

This is not in the interests of the state, not just because of the economic spill-overs Adelaide's cultural organisations generate, but because they are a central plank of South Australian identity. Right now that's the most valuable asset the government owns.

Loss of faith in the culture of South Australia would be loss of faith in South Australia. Creating an Extinction Event in the arts sector will not suit anyone's vision of the future.

If there have to be cuts they must be minimal and strategic and avoid killing off hard-pressed small arts organisations.

Outside the world of Harry Potter it is not possible to make bags of cash magically appear in the

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Written by The Conversation USA

State's coffers. But SA should look at what the Victorian government are now doing and think carefully about its next step. It is a great deal easier to eviscerate an arts sector than it is to build one up.

And there needs to be honesty, lots and lots of honesty. The arts sector must develop an economic understanding that goes beyond arts funding, while the government must learn to see the arts sector as more than a set of numbers in an economic algorithm.

That's a double challenge. But rising to it will bring the two sides closer together. It is vital to keep open channels of communication open because as Tuesday's rally made plain, the state government and its arts practitioners ultimately want the same thing: better lives for the citizens of South Australia.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/it-is-a-great-deal-easier-to-eviscerate-an-arts-sector-than-it-is-to-build-one-up-58212>