

The Australia Council Reorganises Again

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Almost no Australia Council Chair or CEO finishes their reign without reorganising the Council. It's one of the Council's major activities, whatever the merits, involving a great deal of effort and time from all concerned. It always is disruptive and seems to lower morale in the Council itself and often in sections of the arts community. Despite this, it occurs with regularity.

Sometimes it works well, sometimes not, depending on your point of view. The absorption of the Music Board into a Performing Arts Board in the late 80s was not smart; its restoration in the 90s was good for music. The previous Chair might have had the New Media Arts Board priorities just about take over the Council. This one abolishes the Board.

For those who take the Council leadership's arguments at face value, the proposed changes may all seem positive. Even the abolition of two boards (Community Cultural Development and New Media Arts) could seem a step forward if, as promised, the entire Council structure bends itself to achieving their objectives.

Why then is there such upset in the constituencies of those two Boards? Is it just blind resistance to change?

With some knowledge of the scene, lots of questions arise. The MCA has been approached to give its views or take a position. It's too early for that and indeed, whether the Music Council will do so cannot be known at this time. What we can do is to state some pros and cons as they are seen by Council members. We take as our source text the Australia Council's public statement of December 9, 2004, and work our way through some key points.

"Leadership"

The Australia Council ("AC") announced its intention "*to reorganise the Council's structures and processes...to make it a stronger catalyst for arts growth and development in Australia*" and "*to take a greater leadership role in the sector.*"

There is perhaps a key issue buried in these apparently innocuous objectives.

We are very comfortable with its use of the word "catalyst": with the implication that it adds something (usually money!) to existing forces in the arts community that results in more/better artistic activity. Here, artists take the lead, the AC reflects and supports.

But do we want the Australia Council to **lead** the arts sector? Do we want the arts funding body to decide or rather, to reflect, what the arts are doing, where they are going?

Similarly, we hear from the AC its intention "*to drive improvements in the arts sector by building the capabilities of artists and arts organisations and by looking for ways to increase support for the arts from all sources.*"

Hands up who wants to be driven by the AC.

Despite these reservations about the AC as "leader", it is the case that the Council has only limited resources and to apply them to greatest effect it needs to act strategically. If, as can seem the case, funding decisions are made only on the merits of one application after another, we get no sense of cumulative benefit or forward motion. Strategic action can remedy this but of course implies taking one direction rather than another, and therefore assuming something of a leadership role. It's a difficult balance. It won't be helped by an assumption, all too easy for the AC to make, that it leads the arts.

There is one leadership role that many people do expect of the AC: viz. as **public advocate** to government for the interests of the arts sector. The advantage of the AC taking this role is that it has the resources and institutional heft to push its views into the media and to the government. It would also please much of its arts constituency. The disadvantage arises from the fact that the Australia Council is the conduit for government funds to the arts: if it fearlessly advocates in public a position unpopular with the government, it could lose funds the government might otherwise have given to the arts and we all suffer instead of benefiting.

Enhancing artform leadership

"The current roles of artform Managers in the Council's Arts Development Division will be elevated to Artform Directors. These roles will be deeply involved with their respective artform sectors, with a strong external focus--engaging with artists, companies and interest groups, attending exhibitions and performances, and representing the artform in the public sphere ... (They will have) primary authority over program grants and relevant key organisations... (and) will also have a vital role in setting strategic priorities for their artforms across the entire organisation."

One of the most productive periods in the Council's existence was in the early days when the Boards were administered by "Directors" in roles rather like those described above. However, because the directors were well informed and passionate advocates for their artforms both within and outside the Council, they were somewhat of a challenge to the Council itself. Donald Horne, as Chair, organised that the positions would be downgraded to "Managers" of the grants assessment process. The Board structure was changed also, so that the Council was more free of the artform 'barons'. The ability of the Boards to consider the circumstances of their artform and produce and implement policy was greatly weakened.

Part time boards don't have the time to engage meaningfully, without assistance, with the issues across an area as complex as music. They need someone who is able to assist by bringing time and expertise to policy development. The new arrangement should result in boards that are better informed and more strategically orientated. That probably means they also will be more assertive and public controversies could re-emerge.

The AC says that the Board Directors will be "*representing (their) artform in the public sphere.*" It is one thing to see yourself as representing the AC's view of the artform, another to represent the artform itself.

Supporting arts infrastructure

"To increase the vitality and viability of key arts organisations, the Council plans to create a separate section within the Arts Development Division to handle relationships with Key Organisations, led by the new role of Director of Key Organisations...Key arts organisations supported by the Council will increasingly move towards a business plan assessment which will be reviewed by peers. As always, peer artistic assessment remains critical to how the Council operates."

Key organisations that are not arts presenters seem not to be well understood by some boards of the AC. This initiative *might* resolve the problem of artist vs infrastructure funding.

Successful peer review depends upon appropriately skilled peers. Artist peers might be trusted to review artistic matters but be unskilled in assessment of business plans. Which arts/business peers will review business plans? Will all Council grantees be subjected to artist review, including key major performing arts organisations?

A commitment to arts in the community

AKA the Community Cultural Development Board will be abolished. *“The Council has had a Community Cultural Development Board for over 10 years but now believes it can deliver better outcomes for arts in the community through a different approach -- an approach that will see community engagement in the arts at the core of the activities of all parts of the Council. [In fact it has had a Community Arts Board almost since inception.] The Council wants to support the full range of arts activities in the community -- the creation, performance and appreciation of the arts.*

The reorganisation will see the Community Cultural Development Board dissolved and replaced by increased Council-wide commitment to arts in the community, with CCD outcomes continuing to be a vital component.

The Council's Audience and Market Development Division will be renamed Community Partnerships and Market Development (CPMD), with a head of Community Partnerships appointed to coordinate and integrate--across the organisation--strategic support of CCD and other arts activity in the community, along with youth and seniors, education and regional arts activities.

This broad framework will range from partnerships with CCD networks, to professional artists working in communities, to participation and education programs, to market development. Some programs will be supported as strategic initiatives directly by the newly-formed CPMD, and others by Council artform boards with overview by CPMD.

Artists and organisations working in arts in the community will continue to have opportunities to apply for grants through the artform boards, with applications assessed on their artistic and community engagement merits.”

The AC's key proposition here is that it can *“deliver better outcomes for arts in the community through... an approach that will see community engagement in the arts at the core of the activities of all parts of the Council.”*

We can guess that the present structure encourages artform Boards to leave CCD support to the Board funded to develop it, so ghettoising CCD. Certainly, Music Board support to CCD has declined more or less continuously since the late 1980s. Probably, with funding static, the Board felt it had to narrow its priorities.

It could be of great advantage to CCD if it were brought out of its ghetto and vigorously supported by the entire AC structure. But is this likely to happen?

The AC proposes to bolster the change through the creation of a Community Partnerships and Market Development Division, which will take an "overview" of Board CCD activities. The expected outcomes are not described nor are we told how they would be ensured. The CPMD is only a staff structure, without peer advisors to inform and drive it. What authority will it have?

What skills will the artform boards bring to CCD support? In the 80s, the Music Board funded community music officers to build musical activity across entire communities. It quickly discovered that a training in clarinet was not a sufficient preparation for a community music officer to achieve success! He or she needed the broadest conceivable range of professional, social, political and personal skills. Knowledge of this sort, as well as a depth of philosophy, has been built up in the CCD Board and staff. How can that not be lost to the AC if the Board is terminated? How can it be acquired by artform boards now distanced from community arts?

Let us look at some more of the relevant issues.

- When it comes down to it, the decisions of the Board will depend upon the beliefs and priorities of the Board members. If they are committed to CCD, CCD will be funded. If not, they would have to be continually pressured. The present artform boards have not been chosen for their CCD sympathies. Many probably regard CCD as having little to do with the professional arts, nor therefore with the business of the AC.

This opens up the question of **appointments to the Boards**. Such appointments are made by the Minister. They need to be made knowledgeably and wisely and take advantage of advice from specialists. It is not within the power of the AC to ensure this; in this key matter there is an uncontrollable risk.

- There are **multi-artform organisations such as the community arts networks that received CCDB funding whose activities might require support from all of the artform boards** -- a very unwieldy proposition. The AC statement says that the Community Partnerships and Market Development Division (CPMD) will be the alternative source of support -- for **strategic initiatives**. "Initiative" implies "initiate". A funding structure that supports the networks only for "initiatives" doesn't replace their present support system. By what mechanism will the AC support multi-artform CCD organisations?

- Since the benefits to CCD in the new arrangements seem to be rather speculative, **there is some question of AC motivation**. A newspaper report suggested that, for instance, CCDB funds could be redirected to ailing small to medium theatre companies, possibly otherwise headed to closure. Is this the purpose? Their predicament is of course the consequence of the lack of even inflationary increases to the Australia Council core budget by the government. If CCDB funds are redirected to the small to medium arts sector, how will the change “deliver better outcomes for arts in the community”?

- Some would criticise a philosophy that has grown up around CCD which sees **the arts only as a tool for the achievement of other societal objectives**. They probably would be pleased to see CCD placed in the hands of boards that will promote an orientation that is more centred on the artforms.

The AC statement says that the CCDB will be *“replaced by increased Council-wide commitment to arts in the community, with CCD outcomes continuing to be a vital component.”* The implication is that there will be more funds for arts in the community but possibly less for the sort of activity that the CCDB stood for. Is the CCDB philosophy now at odds with that of the AC -- or the government, perhaps?

Built-in flexibility for hybrid arts

This title seems to be spin for the later statement *“The New Media Arts Board will be dissolved.”*

Says the AC: *“The arts in Australia are increasingly varied and multifaceted. To give the Council greater flexibility in supporting emerging arts practice, an Inter-Arts Office will be created. This Office will handle hybrid arts (where artists combine conventional artforms to create new forms of artistic expression). As well... it will triage new media applications, directing them to relevant artform boards of the Australia Council--in most cases to a reshaped Visual Arts/Craft Board or to the Music Board.*

To underpin its new responsibilities, membership of the Visual Arts/Craft Board will reflect new media practice... With this reorganisation the Council bolsters its commitment to supporting arts practice that goes beyond conventional, single artform areas.”

Some of the comments about the proposed new arrangements for CCD apply also to New Media. The willingness and skill boards bring to the funding of new media depend upon the knowledge and predilections of board members, appointed by the Minister. In the past there have been problems, exacerbated by the paucity of funding, of boards withdrawing within rather tight art form boundaries. Such criticism is heard, rightly or wrongly, about the Music Board.

Keith Gallasch of *RealTime* has written an impassioned condemnation of the proposal, asserting that new media is a complex new and vital world that the artform boards cannot be expected to comprehend or support adequately. As with the CCDB, the "dissolution" of the New Media Arts Board will result in an enormous loss to the AC of knowledge and experience.

Music is an ever-broader church. Encompassing within the small number of Music Board members a knowledge of all the possible musics and their various circumstances is impossible, but ideally that's what would be attempted. This might mean that the 'new media' music will be represented by only one person and then has far too much power and responsibility. To ensure the necessary expertise there needs to be a new media/digital panel of board and non-board members, and perhaps a prior allocation of a percentage of board funds.

There is some cross-checking proposed through the Inter-Arts Office. That could help, but it's only a staff position with no peer structure..

A tighter focus

"Existing policy development and research activities will become the responsibility of a new Strategy Department, responding to the needs of the Artform Directors and serving the executives and boards...(A) Director of Strategy will manage the development of strategies [in consultation with all the AC executives]... The Council's strategic priorities will be debated as part of the process for developing the 2005-06 corporate plan... Council-approved strategies will then direct board initiatives...

*They may include arts in education, Indigenous arts, community initiatives, increasing the vitality and viability of key organisations, building markets for Australian art internationally, and better alignment of priorities and funding through all levels of Government. The objective is to concentrate the Council's limited resources on a smaller number of **critical initiatives**, and demonstrate substantial impact in these areas."*

If we agree that the Council should take its role more strategically, it should be a great advantage to have a Director of Strategy available to the Board Directors. But it could also result in one-size-fits-all prescriptions that ignore the particularities of the art forms, as in the past.

"Critical initiatives" are very attractive to funding bodies and governments. They keep the game from getting boring and repetitive. Core funding becomes boring. It's one of the reasons governments don't give more to it, and keep coming up with special projects they can fund and autograph.

The problem is that core funding is needed to support core activities and the lack of it leads to the present crises. The core activities could include "critical initiatives" of an innovative kind. That's a good place for them. But the smaller the core funding the less freedom to be innovative, take risks.

Maybe the Council should fund core activities through "critical initiatives".

Australia Council structure

The restructure would remove two members from the Council of the Australia Council – the chairs of the two disbanded boards. It celebrates this by noting that it will enable the addition of one (only?) "community representative". If this is a good thing, why not add two? But the real issue is that the Council membership will be bereft of expertise in community cultural development and even more importantly, given the extremely rapid changes in the area, new media arts.

PULL QUOTES

1. Do we want the Australia Council to **lead** the arts sector?
2. 'New media' music might be represented by only one person.