

The Arts, and Government

Don Aitkin

ABSTRACT: This text comprises a reflective overview of both the philosophy behind and the qualified practice of (Australian) Governmental assistance funding for 'The Arts'. In sum, it is concluded that such funding needs to be non-partisan, encouraging, 'facilitating' and able to modify its range and dimensions. Difficult though this is likely to be in practice.

'The arts' is a term that covers a very large set of creative activities. We can see the urge to create in almost every aspect of human existence—our clothing, our housing, our sports and physical activities, our gardens, our motor vehicles, aeroplanes, ships, and of course in the domain that is usually referred to as 'the arts'—in our art, music, dance, theatre, film and literature. Human beings are naturally creative, and developing and expressing that creative urge is good for us, both individually and collectively. We seek and respond to 'beauty', although we will often have different standards of beauty, and choose different domains in which to seek it.

And though we keep hearing persistent calls for government funding, most human 'arts' activity is essentially private. When we play music, or paint, or engage in amateur theatre, or video our children playing, or write poems or stories, or dance, or sing—we do these things for our own pleasure, and occasionally for the pleasure of others. We get more than a kick out of it, too. Participation in the arts, as in other activities, builds our sense of self and our capacity to reach out to others. More, any skill and all participation in the arts is likely to last for a long time, and in many instances, for life. People so involved tend to be positive, resilient, outgoing and interested in others; they are rarely to be found in prison.

So, if you look at it as public investment, funding the arts is a form of long-term social welfare, both at the individual and the community levels, and at an amazingly low cost. Since keeping a person in prison is equivalent in cost to the person's maintenance in an excellent hotel, providing people at an early age with the skills and interests in the arts that will sustain them through life, and keep them out of crime and dissolute behaviour is an excellent bargain for the society. Programs like *el sistema* in Venezuela, which have rescued street-kids from vandalism and crime by teaching them to play a musical instrument, and thereby

created a national set of youth orchestras, offer dramatic examples of what can be done. The criminal justice system alone costs us as a society around \$8 billion each year. Arts funding is around \$6 billion. An increase in the latter with the intent of reducing the former would seem to be a good investment for the country, and for local areas everywhere.

While much creative activity begins with the individual, those who value a particular kind of activity, such as music, for example, come together to play and to listen. They will celebrate their particular activity in shows, and festivals and like events. In time they will seek a better place in which to play and listen, and approach their local council or their state government for such a facility. If there are enough of these suppliants, and if the facility that they seek could be used for other purposes, they may well be successful in the long run. Australia's town and district halls came into being to serve such purposes, among others.

Virtually all collaborative arts activities (such as concerts, displays, exhibitions, performances) require organisation and thus administrative support. Once the activity becomes large the administrative support becomes extensive. All 'key arts organisations' known to me rest on a mixture of funded and unfunded administrative support, the latter being supplied most often by volunteers, who give their time, energy and money to ensure that the activity continues to exist, even if their contribution is not at a professional level. Private donors prefer to be associated with events and acquisitions, and are generally reluctant to give money for administration, though this is usually the most critical aspect of any arts activity.

What is the Role of Government in 'The Arts'?

Because involvement in creativity is good for us, as argued above, governments have two principal roles. The first is *encouragement*. Because people involved in creativity are less likely than others to be involved in anti-social behaviour, random violence, theft and other crimes, and binge drinking, government encouragement of creativity in all its beauty-seeking forms both establishes creativity as a social norm and assists in reducing crime, despair and alienation. As already stated, encouraging our latent creativity in all its beneficial forms is enlightened social welfare for which future generations will bless us. Governments encourage the arts by proclaiming their importance, by ensuring that children are taught how to become creative at an early age, and by celebrating outstanding examples of creativity (as in establishing awards and prizes of various kinds).

The second role is *facilitation*. Governments' control of the curriculum of schools allows them to ensure that the creativity of children is indeed developed in their education. Civic governments can

ensure that their cities are beautiful through wise rules about urban form and design, and by acquiring public art to adorn places and spaces. They can, and should, ensure that some art forms have the necessary milieu to support them. While ‘the arts’ are essentially a private activity, private citizens cannot easily provide themselves with a theatre, a museum, a gallery, an opera company or (in sport, another form of creativity) a large stadium. These facilities are appropriately funded (or partly funded) through the public purse, and they provide possibilities for people to see, hear or participate in arts activities that would otherwise be outside their reach. The capacity to see and hear then will stimulate some of them to engage in these arts activities themselves.

What governments in democracies should not do is ‘direct’, or attempt to influence the direction of, one arts activity as opposed to another. The urge to create comes from individuals, not from the community, let alone from the state. Governments should encourage and facilitate individual creativity, but not seem to prefer one kind of artistic creativity to another.

How Should Public Money Best Be Spent on The Arts?

It follows from the above that the most valuable expenditure of public money will be on the encouragement and facilitation of the arts activity of individuals and groups. But we never start with a clean slate in making policy, so in fact some of what is presently done in arts funding does not fit neatly with the above advice. Moreover, there is always an expectation on the part of recipients that what has been provided in the past must be provided now and in the future, if not increased. Here are a few propositions set out as possible rules for governments.

1. *There is no ‘right amount of money’ that should be devoted to the arts.* Governments spend what they are prepared to spend on the arts, knowing that in Australia ‘jobs’ are valued above all else (and, indeed, having a job is the foundation of Australian social policy). Sport is presently valued more highly than the arts, as are schools, hospitals, good roads and almost everything else. Yes, there is a strong argument for valuing human creativity highly, and then encouraging and facilitating it. But no Australian government has gone down this path to any degree. If it should do so, then ‘the arts’ would become before long a ‘whole of government’ endeavour. In general, Australian governments and bureaucracies see the arts as peripheral, though this attitude seems to be changing slowly. Plainly, more could be spent on the arts, as on any other funded activity, but quickly to double, or treble, the

amount spent on the arts will increase the number of applicants, probably comparably, rather than double or treble the quality of what is being done. It will certainly lead to a comparable level of disappointment from the unfunded. Step-jump changes of this kind ought to be avoided; a slow and steady increase is to be preferred.

2. *Governments should note that when they spend on the arts they are subsidising voluntary activity.* On the one hand, governments will need to see substantial signs of activity in any arts area for which funding is sought, since elected governments are not, and should not see themselves as, grand patrons like the Medici in Florence or 19th century American magnates like J.P. Morgan. On the other hand, when they do fund an arts activity because they can see that there is considerable public support for it, they will usually be contributing only a fraction of the resources already being devoted to the activity by ordinary citizens. Very few arts activities are commercially successful over time save in the field of popular music. To put it another way, virtually all arts activities will run at a loss in the short run, but contribute greatly to social well-being in the longer run.
3. *Governments should avoid being inveigled into backing imagined winners.* It is plain that human creativity can take many forms, and while music, theatre, dance, literature, painting and sculpture have been the early ones in Western culture, and perhaps all cultures, changes in technology have allowed the emergence of newer forms. In my opinion, none of these art forms is intrinsically superior to any other, and in deciding whether or not to facilitate a particular arts form governments need to look at the numbers involved, the facilities already available, the likely growth of the art form, and so on.
4. *Facilitating the administrative support of arts activity is a worthwhile expenditure.* As has been stated above, private philanthropy rarely extends to supporting the administrative costs of an arts activity. Since arts activities are rarely commercially successful, this area can be seen as a kind of ‘market failure’, and government support can be justified. It is worth noting that in the arts domain salaries, conditions and tenure are much worse than in almost anywhere else in the field of work, so that government support obtains a better return for the dollar than elsewhere.

5. *There can be diverse reasons for government support of the arts and of festivals and events.* While the arts are worth supporting because of the beneficial effects the arts have on the tenor of society and on the lives of individuals, arts events can be supported for other reasons, such as the attraction of tourists, the bonding of people from different cultures and backgrounds (as in multicultural festivals), and the pursuit and recognition of excellence (as in the Nobel Prize for Literature and its counterparts). ‘The arts’ can be seen as an industry, as contributing to GDP nationally and locally, and providing a part of the rich texture of Australian economic life. They ought never to be seen as somehow a dispensable luxury. These imperatives need to be distinguished, both conceptually and financially, from the straightforward rationale: that a flourishing arts activity, like good education and good health, is beneficial for the society at both the individual and the collective levels.
6. *Governments should be wary of becoming perpetual patrons of particular art forms.* For reasons already set out, the pattern of arts activity is somewhat unpredictable and likely to change slowly over time. Unless governments are prepared to increase the level of funding, government support of particular arts activities is likely to be set in stone. Ending what beneficiaries perceive as a permanent arrangement will cause great unhappiness and protest. In particular, while it is appropriate for governments to award prizes and fellowships to celebrate and reward excellence, the number of these awards should be kept small. Beyond a certain point, it is not the business of government to provide careers in the arts for those who seek them. Putting it another way, there is a lot of proclaimed excellence about. Funding institutions that support the arts and also provide an income for those who will practise their art in some form, however, is appropriate.
7. *Since arts activities will grow at least in rough proportion to the size of the population, Government needs to match its funding at least to that increase.* The proportion of any government’s Budget that is devoted to arts funding is presently equivalent to a rounding error. Given all the above it makes good sense to argue that arts funding needs to relate to the growth of the population, not be held constant.

Where Should We Go From Here?

Over the last fifty years arts funding has gone from ‘very little’ to ‘a little’, which in proportionate terms is considerable. My own view, which you can infer from the above, is that arts funding ought to be a whole-of-government matter. But the danger with that is that government will have to have a ‘policy’ and a ‘strategy’ to achieve the goals of the policy. And like many other areas of life, the costs are now, and the pay-off, in dollar terms is unknown and in the future.

What’s more, I want to keep what people do, in terms of creativity, as a private matter, not under some kind of direction from others, no matter how noble their motives. So it is a rich and rather awkward issue

But I think that it is one worth canvassing.

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Play and Folklore

This is a forum for discussion about childhood and children’s culture. It publishes articles, letters, memoir pieces, and research studies that examine what children do when largely free of adult direction or control. Their colloquial speech, songs, games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, insults, and enmities are treated, as is much of their beliefs and hopes.

There are two issues every year, these edited by June Factor, Gwenda Davey and Judy McKinty. They are accessible on the Museum Victoria website at <museumvictoria.com.au/playandfolklore>

The Museum’s Folklore of Children holds over 10,000 cards and other written material recording children’s playlore. While the collection reaches back to the 1870s, most of the collection was assembled after 1970.

Interesting aspects of the collection are the cards on: riddles; parodies; rhymes for fun; clapping games and rhymes; counting out rhymes; taunts and insults; war cries; other games.

Other aspects of the collections are: Memories of Aboriginal Childhoods; Games of the Past; a special collection made in 1984, and one resulting in a publication entitled ‘Play and Friendships in a Multicultural Playground’.

Another collection is that concerned with the field work of the American, Dorothy Howard in her ten months (1954-55) in Australia.

The whole is certainly the most comprehensive collection in this field in the Southern Hemisphere.