

Resolution of Council

18 May 2020

Item 3.2

Support for the Arts

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

The essential measures to stop the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus and protect public health have taken a terrible toll on national cultural life. Theatres, cinemas and other live entertainment venues along with galleries and museums are now closed and it is uncertain when it will financially viable for them to reopen.

A letter to the Prime Minister signed by over 100 arts and cultural organisations highlighted the devastating impact this has had: “Work that has taken years to develop has been lost. Livelihoods are jeopardised. Our venues and other programs have been closed down by government order. As each day passes, the likelihood of reopening or restarting diminishes. The scale of loss across the cultural and creative sector is unprecedented – and devastating, culturally and economically.”

While the framework for easing restrictions announced by the Prime Minister on 8 May 2020 allows theatres to reopen and eventually gatherings of 100 people, physical distancing requirements means this will have little practical effect. Most live performances will not be financially viable and many theatres, concert halls and other live entertainment venues will remain closed. Significantly, while the Safe Work Australia website which provides industry specific Covid-19 workplace advice has none for the arts and live entertainment industries.

These restrictions have had a similarly devastating impact on arts workers. As of 10 April 2020, the ‘I lost my gig’ website recorded lost earnings of \$330 million by musicians, performers, and others with live music related jobs. The closure of bars, restaurants and cafes at the same time denied them traditional alternative sources of employment. These two sectors were the hardest hit. Between 14 March and 18 April, 33.4 per cent of jobs were lost in accommodation and food services and 27 per cent arts and recreation.

On 5 May 2020, while outlining job losses across the Australian economy, the Prime Minister revealed that the hospitality sector had lost 441,000 jobs followed by a loss of 180,000 arts and recreation jobs. This was the first and only time the Prime Minister had uttered the word “arts” since the restrictions were first imposed in March.

These official figures may not reveal the full extent of the impact. The Grattan Institute estimates that creative and performing arts activities employment is expected to drop by 75 per cent. Yet because of their particular employment arrangements, many cultural workers are not eligible for the Commonwealth Government’s JobKeeper program. Suggestions that they should apply for the less financially beneficial JobSeeker program sends a message that their work does not have the same value as other Australians.

It is an appalling message, given their significant contribution to the Australian economy. Research by the Bureau of Communications and Arts in 2018 found cultural and creative activity in Australia contributed \$111.7 billion in 2016-17 across the economy, constituting 6.4 per cent of GDP. Of this cultural activity contributed \$63.5 billion or 57 per cent of total creative and cultural activity. In the same period, the arts, screen and culture sector contributed \$16.4 billion to the NSW economy, and employed the equivalent of approximately 118,000 full time workers. Every dollar spent on arts, screen and culture generated a return of \$1.88 to the NSW economy. This economic impact is only possible because of the money we are willing to spend.

We spend money on the arts, culture and creative output because they delight us, provoke us and help us make sense of our lives. We cannot do without them. The arts advocate Robyn Archer challenges us to imagine spending a day without encountering the work of artists, designers or other creative people. On such a day you would not hear any music or see any visual image. You couldn’t use any appliance, wear any clothes, eat from a plate or drink from a cup, because these are also the products of someone’s creativity.

Despite this, the Commonwealth Government has all but ignored the impacts of Covid-19 on Australia’s cultural and creative sector, and not only in the design of the JobKeeper program. Despite the sector presenting a strong case for significant targeted support, the Federal Government has provided only \$27 million.

This failure may be variously explained by callous indifference, wilful ignorance or a continuation of the unseemly ideological culture wars prosecuted by the Coalition

Government since its election in 2013. Its first budget in 2014 slashed arts funding by \$87.1 million over four years. Australia Council funding has since declined by nearly 20 per cent with three-fifths of this funding quarantined for the major flagship companies leaving little for individual artists and the small to medium sector, the seed-beds of our culture.

These seed-beds ensure a strong, vital creative sector, by enabling artists and performers to experiment and take risks, nurture their talent and eventually renew our major cultural institutions. They are the future sources of our national pride. We all like to applaud the band that started out in a provincial city that went to win an international recording contract and play Radio City Music in New York, the performer who started out performing in a tiny hotel cellar and went on to an international career and a Tony Award nomination or the actor who was first noticed by audiences in a small Darlinghurst theatre and went on to win two Oscars. If we let our creatives slip through the cracks and we fail to support our iconic institutions we may have little to celebrate in the future.

The Government must not only repair the significant damage already done, it must publicly acknowledge the need for doing so. The Australian arts community is calling on the Prime Minister to publicly recognise the value of the cultural and creative sector to all Australians, and affirm his commitment to the people and organisations that inspire us.

I support this call and hope it would have the strong support of the business community, civic and community leaders and state and local governments. I hope the challenges facing the cultural and creative community pre-Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 would also be acknowledged: the critical shortage of accessible and affordable creative space and cultural infrastructure; ensuring opportunities for young and emerging artists, and maintaining support for our flagship cultural institutions. The current crisis facing Carriageworks should sound a warning.

Reopening live performance venues will present immediate challenges. Audiences may not return quickly, or economic reasons or because of a fear of being infected. South Korea, where large theatres are now open, may provide a way forward with rigorous prevention measures. Cast members are regularly tested and audience members are temperature checked and required to wear face masks.

Our cultural and creative sectors will need our support if is to confidently survive, recover and renew. Not only targeted financial support, but the recognition and acknowledgement that their survival, recovery and renewal is vital for all of us.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Scully –

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note that:

- (i) while essential to protect public health and prevent transmission of the SARSCoV-2 virus, the Covid-19 physical distancing measures have had a devastating impact on our national cultural life and the livelihoods and wellbeing of Australians working in the creative sectors;
- (ii) the cultural and creative sectors make a significant contribution to the Australian economy, our national wellbeing and our daily lives; and
- (iii) the cultural and creative sectors will face significant challenges post-Covid-19, many of which existed pre-Covid-19, including addressing the critical shortage of accessible and affordable creative space and cultural infrastructure, ensuring opportunities continue for young and emerging artists, maintaining support for our flagship cultural institutions; and the immediate challenges when live performance venues reopen; and

- (B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader to request:
 - (i) the Commonwealth Government:
 - (a) provides a substantial targeted package to enable the creative and cultural sectors to survive and recover from the impacts of Covid-19; and
 - (b) expands the JobKeeper program to include workers currently excluded from the program, including casuals, visa holders and creative and cultural workers;
 - (ii) the Prime Minister publicly recognise and acknowledge the value of the cultural and creative sector to all Australians, and affirm his commitment to the people and organisations that inspire us;
- (C) for as long as performance spaces remain closed, Council enable and encourage arts organisations to engage with the community via performances in outdoor public spaces where physical distancing is possible. For example Sydney Town Hall steps, City of Sydney-owned Rotundas and in our public parks; and
- (D) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to the NSW Premier and Acting Minister for the Arts Gladys Berejiklian requesting an urgent review of current funding arrangements for the state's arts and cultural sector with a view to providing appropriate support to ensure the long-term sustainability of organisations severely affected by Covid-19 related shutdowns.

The Minute, as varied by consent, was carried unanimously.

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