

29 September 2019

Mr Andrew Barr  
Chief Minister and Treasurer  
GPO Box 1020  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Via email: [budgetconsultation@act.gov.au](mailto:budgetconsultation@act.gov.au)

Dear Chief Minister

## **2020-21 ACT Budget Consultation Submission**

I am writing this submission as an individual with a strong interest in the ACT's cultural footprint and as a professional actor based in Canberra.

For many years the guiding principle for decision makers in Canberra has been the growth of our city measured by the physical construction of buildings. This has resulted in something of an edifice complex and is now sorely affecting the strategy behind arts funding.

Earlier this month A New Approach<sup>1</sup>(ANA), an independent think tank championing effective investment and return in Australian arts and culture, released their first insight report. Finding 4 of this report addresses capital expenditure (facilities and buildings) versus recurrent funding (programs, grants, wages etc). The following sub-findings are most relevant to my submission:

- *Across the entire decade, total recurrent expenditure per capita in Australia has been falling.*
- *State and territory governments have most often had the biggest focus on capital expenditure, spending between 15.0 per cent and 23.1 per cent of their cultural budget on these items.*
- *Local governments have spent between 12.4 per cent and 16.9 per cent of their cultural budget on capital expenditure<sup>2</sup>*

It is important to note the national scope of this study and that these sub-findings are extracted from the full report which provides a baseline understanding of the trends in expenditure on culture by all levels of government over the last decade.

I believe the growing trend of facilities funding versus program funding in the ACT is depressing the professional theatre scene and limiting professional artistic growth. The

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<sup>1</sup> ANA was established in 2018, administered by the Australian Academy of the Humanities and funded by [The Myer Foundation](#), the [Tim Fairfax Family Foundation](#) and the [Keir Foundation](#). ANA was created to address a shortfall in up-to-date, independent and accurate data and research which paints a clear picture of the trends—past and present—for investment in Australia's arts and culture, and which can lead a national conversation on the future needs for the sector

<sup>2</sup> *The Big Picture: public expenditure on artistic, cultural and creative activity in Australia*, Pages 22-24  
<https://www.humanities.org.au/new-approach/report1/>

recommendations outlined in this submission present possible solutions to ensuring the maturation of Canberra artists, presenting Canberra stories, to Canberra audiences.

What services do you believe are most important for the ACT?

Cultural activities enrich every element of people's lives. The ACT is Australia's youngest city and has a significant amount of catch up to do in developing its character, having achieved self-government only just over 30 years ago. Sound delivery of core services is, of course, essential. But the next most important consideration for decision makers is the cultural footprint and offering a city can provide.

#### RECOMMENDATION

- With the creation of two key cultural precincts in Canberra, Kingston and the Canberra Theatre Complex, create a strategic plan, driven by artist involvement and advice from the Minister's Creative Council for these locations once they are completed.

How can the ACT Government deliver current services more efficiently and productively to better meet the needs of Canberrans?

#### RECOMMENDATION

- For every facility provided funding, concurrent and ongoing program funding must also be provided. Otherwise the allocation is for infrastructure funding and administrators, not arts funding for artists. Decision makers must allocate and stipulate funding to make ACT Government infrastructure sing once built. The alternative is an increasing preponderance of hollow concrete blocks and a city barren of the life a busy cultural scene brings to it.

Are there particular services that you think the ACT Government can improve?

There are three organisations which play a significant role for the acting profession in Canberra. These are The Street Theatre, Screen Canberra and the Canberra Theatre Centre.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Street Theatre requires further funding to tour viable productions interstate, enable larger seasons and cast sizes and support the independent professional acting scene in Canberra. It is a facility which is funded and concurrent program funding would enable the building to fully contribute to Canberra's artistic growth.
- The scoping study for a new Canberra Theatre Complex must include a cost-benefit analysis of a producing effort by the Theatre. A venue for hire only would be infrastructure funding, not arts funding and will further encourage the exodus of Canberra talent as this venue currently feeds the notion that only interstate work is worthy of programming.
- The Screen Industry Development Fund should continue to be supported and further funding considered in the future. Screen Canberra is committed to developing the industry here with a two-pronged effort of supporting and funding local projects and attracting major national producers and industry to Canberra.

Screen Canberra do this with a view to integrating both local and national industry. This provides professional development, career exposure, educational and networking opportunities for the Canberra industry.

- A Theatre Industry Development Fund, following the same model as Screen Canberra, would be of immense benefit to the professional theatre scene in Canberra. This would require a wider role than that of the Street Theatre. It would be better run from the new Canberra Theatre Complex and could in fact give that complex a more defined role in contributing to the life of the city. A program for Canberra-based and developed professional theatre would support not only the career actors but all professional creatives involved in those productions.

What can the ACT Government do to make Canberra even more liveable?

Buildings alone cannot make a city more liveable. Consideration must be given to what will fill those buildings and the Minister's Creative Council is well placed to drive artist led and artist run initiatives.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that the thriving amateur theatre scene in Canberra cannot replace, or even create, a solid professional scene. It is important to have a community offering. However, if artists cannot establish themselves in Canberra, they will continue to leave.

I hope the Government is able to take the foregoing recommendations into consideration during the upcoming Budget consultations.

I believe my recommendations would not only enhance the lives of Canberrans directly, it would fill a large void in our tourism attractions. People come to Canberra to visit our world class national institutions but have little to do in the evenings. A professional theatre scene would be an added encouragement to stay longer in the City.

Being our own, we could align productions with other events, not only those at the National Gallery or National Portrait Gallery for example, but to coincide with Raiders, Brumbies and GWS matches.

Should you wish me to expand on any of the points I have made I can be contacted via [lexi@sekulesconsulting.com](mailto:lexi@sekulesconsulting.com). I am happy for this submission to be made public.

Yours Sincerely,



Lexi Sekules