



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Regional Arts Fund**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 25 May 2015**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 25 May 2015  
**Page** 4441  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Dreyfus, Mark, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr DREYFUS** (Isaacs—Deputy Manager of Opposition Business) (12:38): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion because it provides me and other speakers from the Labor side the opportunity to reject the claim that this government is a strong supporter of the arts and is a supporter of regional arts in particular; it is not. This is a government that came to office with no policy for the arts, certainly no written policy.

Senator Brandis has claimed that last year's train wreck of a budget was good for the arts. This is another utterly untrue claim by a government that has made untrue claims its hallmark. The arts were slashed by over \$100 million in last year's budget. And now Senator Brandis claims that this year's budget has no cuts of any substance for the arts—utterly untrue again.

To start with, this year's budget—this fraud and hoax of a budget—entrenches the cuts of last year. The Abbott government has suddenly forgotten all about the budget emergency it has been claiming for years and apparently has money to splash around—but not for the arts. This year's budget imposes cuts of a further \$13 million to the arts through supposed efficiencies to arts and cultural programs run by the Ministry, the Australia Council and Screen Australia. These cuts will cause enormous disruption for hundred of small to medium arts organisations around the country in regional towns and cities.

But, serious as these new cuts are, compounding last year's, what is of much greater concern is that Senator Brandis has ripped \$105 million from the Australia Council and placed it under his personal control. This will cause even more disruption to arts activities across the country. Senator Brandis says he wants to use this money to set up a so-called national program for excellence in the arts within his own ministry. Senator Brandis seems to fancy himself as Australia's arts supremo. He seems to think he can spot excellence in the arts, while the Australia Council—an independent body of some of Australia's most successful and visionary artists—cannot.

It has long been accepted in this country that arts funding decisions should be free of political interference. This is in part because artists will sometimes be critical of government. They should not be forced to produce art that meets with the approval of the government of the day. That is why the Whitlam government established the Australia Council as an independent statutory body with robust peer review and merit assessment procedures to make arts funding decisions at arms length from the government of the day. But Senator Brandis thinks he knows better and decided that he will be responsible for arts funding decisions for over \$25 million each year.

Whatever claims Senator Brandis makes about not being the assessor, the fact is that decisions about who gets funded and who does not will be made within his department. As minister, he will be responsible for those decisions. Senator Brandis has still not explained who will be funded or on what terms or according to what criteria. The potential for political influence on arts funding is obvious. Because we know the vagaries of political favour and of tacit or explicit threats to funding, it will have a chilling effect on criticism of the government. The removal of \$105 million from the Australia Council has already had a direct and destructive impact.

The Australia Council advised last week that the six-year funding of arts organisations, which has been worked on for many months, will now not proceed, and the Australia Council's June funding round has been cancelled. Senator Brandis's new arts slush fund will require administrative staffing and support—further reducing the funds available for artists. The Abbott government is duplicating functions already performed by the Australia Council. This is red tape expansion from a government that claims to want to reduce red tape.

Far from being a friend of the arts, it has taken Senator Brandis less than two years in his job to slash arts funding and to trash the basic principle that arts in our nation should be free from political interference. Labor will resist this disgraceful, wasteful and divisive move by Senator Brandis to assert political control over the arts. In government, we will revisit all of these decisions made by Senator Brandis and the Abbott government. We will ensure that independence as a basic principle is maintained in arts funding in this country.