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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**GRIEVANCE DEBATE**

**Attorney-General and Minister for the Arts**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 25 May 2015**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Bandt, Adam, MP

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**Mr BANDT** (Melbourne) (17:07): I rise today in this grievance debate to talk about how aggrieved Australia feels that George Brandis is the Attorney-General and Minister for the Arts. Has there ever been a minister more incompetent and detested by his own stakeholders than Minister Brandis? He is the Attorney-General who believes people should have the right to be bigots but does not believe journalists should be free from internet and smartphone surveillance to report in the public interest, free from the fear of endangering their sensitive sources. He is the arts minister who says he believes in freedom of speech but not the ability of Australian artists do their work and speak truth to power, free from the fear that they will have their funding pulled if they offend the personal arts fiefdom that the minister is erecting for himself. He is the arts minister who does not believe in the freedom of persecuted refugees to seek asylum on our shores but thinks big business should be free to bring in overseas workers in film and television to undermine our own cultural capital and employment opportunities for local creatives.

For this arts minister and this Attorney-General, war is peace, freedom is bigotry and ignorance is strength. Minister Brandis likes to talk about freedom, but for him freedom means defending people like Andrew Bolt while attacking this country's best journalists, who break stories in the national interest. For him, freedom means his freedom to pick and choose his personal pet arts projects while threatening the rest of our artistic community with funding cuts if they step out of line.

Let's get into specifics. Under Arts Minister George Brandis, Australian art has endured acute and political attacks. In their first budget last year, Arts Minister Brandis and the coalition government cut \$28.2 million out of the Australia Council.

Now, in their second budget, the coalition government has cut even more funding from the council. This time around they are suffering total cuts of \$110 million. Arts Minister Brandis has taken this money out of the council and redirected it straight into the coffers of his own department. The repossession of Australian Council's Creative Partnerships Australia, Visions of Australia, Festivals Australia, Major Festivals Initiative, and the creation of the National Centre for Excellence in the Arts, will mean that grants from this new fund will seemingly be decided at the discretion of the Arts Minister of the day.

This is the Arts Minister who has previously argued that art will always provoke debate. He said: 'That's why we have an arms-length and peer-reviewed structure for the allocation for the funding'. But this move does the exact opposite. In this one budget measure he has undermined the past 42 years of success in artist-centred, peer-reviewed funding, operating at arm's length from the government of the day. This begs the question: what art will now be funded?—given that George Brandis now has the final tick off of where our arts funding goes.

Further to this, he has cut \$3.6 million from the already underfunded Screen Australia, the Commonwealth's main film support body. This is on top of the \$25.1 million cut out of Screen Australia last year. Together, these moves have led to Screen Australia, Screen Producers Australia and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance to all say that the screen industry will be seriously affected.

He has also cut \$4 million from galleries and museums, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, the National Museum and the National Portrait Gallery; and a further \$7.3 million in 'efficiency dividends' by reducing funding to programs like ArtStart and Artists-in-residence programs. These are core programs that directly contribute to the development of future arts leaders and provide crucial opportunities for arts practitioners to gain real industry skills. These are an investment in the ongoing vibrancy and vitality of the arts sector, helping to shape arts leaders such as Fiona Menzies from Creative Partnerships Australia, Sandra Willis of Opera Australia, Beverly Growden of Canberra Glassworks, and Lou Oppenheim of Circus Oz.

All of Brandis' cuts to Australian arts have led to prominent and respected Australians, like Robert Manne, Lisa Dempster, Christos Tsiolkas, Van Badham and Benjamin Law, writing an open letter to the Arts Minister, calling for him to reverse these changes. The letter is signed by more than 100 Australians involved in the arts, and many more who share their passion for the arts and their concerns about the future of the arts under this Arts Minister and this government. The letter concludes:

Minister Brandis seems to be under the impression that Australian culture is monolithic – that there is only one way to be a proper Australian artist. The vibrancy and diversity of Australian arts indicate that nothing could be further from the truth. The many small arts organisations across the country – galleries, libraries, theatre groups, performers and publications that are most at risk from funding cuts – are the primary cultivators of Australian culture, fostering the early work of those artists we now celebrate, such as Christos Tsiolkas and Margaret Olley. But small arts organisations are also a merit in and of themselves. They allow millions of diverse individuals to imagine, collaborate and participate in culture-making. Democracy is founded upon reflection, civic participation, and hope. Art provides space for all of this and more.

This Budget is an enormous blow to the arts community in Australia. It will impoverish Australian culture and society. It will mean loss of livelihood for many arts workers. It will mean many important artworks – works that would inform national debate, expanding the possibilities of this country and its citizens – will simply never be made. In 2011, the arts sector directly employed 531,000 people, and indirectly created another 3.7 million jobs. In 2008–9, the arts contributed \$86 billion (7%) to the Australian GDP. Artists are workers and taxpayers, and a vital part of the economy. They are also consumers and lovers of art and culture. They should not be penalised for contributing so passionately to Australia's cultural ecosystem.

We call on the Federal Government and Minister for the Arts George Brandis to reverse all proposed cuts to the arts sector ...

We ask that you oppose defunding the art sector, particularly smaller organisations and practitioners – that is, a whole generation of artists, writers, publishers, editors, theatre makers, actors, dancers and thinkers across Australia. We ask that you help us to continue building a world where culture and art is possible for everyone.

That is the end of their letters. As someone passionate about the arts and their power to make us feel, learn and better understand ourselves and the world, as a proud Melburnian, as the representative of one of Australia's cultural and artistic centres and as the Greens spokesperson for the arts, I stand proudly with these Australians and call on George Brandis, as the arts minister, to reverse his cuts and invest in and value the arts for what they deserve. Not only has he cut millions of dollars out of the arts; George Brandis has also made moves to deregulate labour standards for the importation of overseas workers in film and television. The government is seeking to undermine the 420 subclass entertainment visa which protects roles for Australian workers on taxpayer-subsided film and TV productions. This move would undercut our cultural capital and the precious few employment opportunities in the industry.

But it is not just in his role of arts minister that George Brandis has disappointed. As Attorney-General, he has had some equally shocking moments and has led even farther-reaching attacks. If you thought that the Attorney-General's attacks on working women were limited to the director of the Human Rights Commission, Gillian Triggs, then you were wrong. The Attorney-General does not want any women to get more superannuation. As in many areas, there is a gender gap when it comes to Australians' super. On average, women end up with \$44,000 in their super accounts while men, on average, have nearly double this at \$82,000. The Greens have taken steps to make it easier for employers to pay their women employees more super, but the Attorney-General has written to me and said that the government will not support us in our moves to make it easier to even up the balance between men and women when it comes to super.

In fact, it is not just women that the Attorney-General has failed. He has sold out all Australians with his mass surveillance and data retention laws. Under George Brandis, every Australian has been turned into a suspect. There used to be a basic presumption that, unless you were suspected of having done something wrong, the government had no right to know who you were talking to or where you were at any particular time. In one fell swoop, this Attorney-General has put an end to that. Under the new laws, internet and smartphone data will be kept for two years, even if you are not suspected of having done anything wrong, and if you are a journalist trying to protect your sources then you are in trouble.

Every Australian citizen has been turned into a suspect by this Attorney-General – all of this by an Attorney-General who could not even describe what metadata was. Many of us remember watching that excruciating interview. Watching our Attorney-General try and explain metadata was like watching my dog try to play chess. It was one of the most awkward several moments to sit through. This was the man who wanted to pass laws that would mean Australians would go to jail if they broke them and he could not even explain what those laws were. Why should Australians trust this man with all of their data? Why should the government spend hundreds of millions of dollars to store the personal information of every single one of its citizens? Let me say here that we, the Greens, will continue to be the real opposition to George Brandis and his anti-freedom agenda.