

The Faustian Bargain: Government Sponsorship of the Arts

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Noting that American civilisation was two centuries old before it produced Nathaniel Hawthorne, its first major novelist, Henry James reflected that 'it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature . . . it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion'. The growth of a high culture is an organic process, taking place only when the bed of cultural compost has attained a certain depth and richness, the result of many generations of personal, social and political relationships and the interaction of people with very different intellectual styles (James, 1879;1956:2, 34).

Once this condition exists, the special ambience in which the arts can flourish is created by civic cultures in which substantial numbers of people enjoy the arts, and perhaps have some amateur skill in writing, music or painting. Richard Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* emphasises the salient fact about 16th-century Nuremberg: it was a city full of excellent amateur singers, who knew good singing and good poetry when they heard them and were happy to put up the money for a national contest. John Ruskin told the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, in two powerful lectures in 1856, that the middle classes of the industrial and commercial age should think of themselves as the heirs of the Medici and of the aristocratic patrons of the old regime in Paris and Vienna, and should turn their cities into power houses of the arts as well as industry (Ruskin, n.d.). The 19th and 20th centuries have witnessed an extraordinary cultural flowering as civic activists and fund-raisers in great cities such as Paris, Amsterdam, Leipzig, Milan, New York and Philadelphia have competed to attract and maintain the best opera companies and orchestras, and the best universities, publishing houses and libraries. As Ruskin had hoped, Manchester did well, with the Halle Orchestra and a distinguished library and art gallery. To take an Australian example, Melbourne has had this competitive cultural momentum at least since the 1880s.

In its turn, successful civic patronage depends on the drive generated by wealthy individual patrons with flair and enthusiasm. There is no historical break in the long line of patrons from the rulers of Italian cities in the Renaissance to the aristocrats who commissioned works from Mozart and Beethoven, and to Diaghilev in the early 20th century — his instruction to his protégés Cocteau and Stravinsky: 'Astonish me!' — and to Winaretta Singer, herself a first-rate musician, who fi-

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nanced the first performances of works by Debussy, Faure, and a dozen others; or Peter Watson, who paid the expenses of the magazine *Horizon* in the 1940s and had the enterprise to appoint Cyril Connolly as its editor; or Rudolf Bing, whose reign at the New York Metropolitan Opera was one of the most exciting episodes in American cultural history. There are hundreds of American, European and British examples; and patronage in Australia has a very good record, running from the Felton Bequest to the Ian Potter Foundation.

Patronage at the higher level of kingdoms and nation states has generated both excellent art and deplorable vulgarity. At its best it is reflected in the works of Michelangelo and Velazquez, Bach and Haydn, commissioned, once again, by highly cultivated individuals who were guided by their own excellent taste or, like Louis XIV and Frederick the Great, knew enough about art to take the best advice. At its worst, royal or national patronage has produced crass and pretentious monuments, statues of kings trampling their defeated enemies underfoot, triumphal arches and royal tombs, and modern equivalents like the gigantic model of Saddam Hussein's fist in Baghdad. Even this bombastic genre is occasionally redeemed by the good taste of a ruler in commissioning a first-rate artist; papal tombs and royal portraits are sometimes artistic masterpieces.

In the modern period the rulers of states have generally not been connoisseurs of the arts, but they have been more determined and more systematic than their predecessors in exploiting the capacity of art and literature to shape public opinion. Modern governments have offered artists lavish funding and privileges, but in return they have expected — or, more often, insisted — that the arts should create images of officially approved morality and political duty. It is a Faustian bargain, and one in which the devil wastes no time in foreclosing.

In 19th-century France, where the creative arts were subsidised and controlled by the Ministry of Public Instruction, all works submitted for prizes at the annual Salon and for the official Prix de Rome in music and painting had to conform to one of four approved themes: historical, biblical, classical, or Napoleonic. Artists were supposed to interpret these so as to endorse the ideals and achievements of the current regime: in opening the Salon of 1857 under the Second Empire the minister for the arts announced that the mission of art was 'to glorify moral beauty and the great acts of our history . . . At no time has France furnished more ample material for the brush and the chisel. How many excellent subjects, indeed, since the beginning of the present reign!'¹

Twentieth-century governments have been even more demanding. The artist's function in a modern state, Josef Goebbels proclaimed in a speech to the Reich Cultural Chamber in 1934, is 'to be in tune with the people's aspirations to nationhood' and to encourage 'healthy trends' in the national consciousness (Reimann, 1977:167, 171-2). And in his 1937 Address to the Joint Congress of the Reich Chamber of Culture and Strength through Joy, Goebbels was able to say with satis-

¹ *Discours de M. Achille Fould, Ministre de Napoleon III . . . Salon de 1857*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1857.

faction that after several years of subsidies and encouragement to writers, painters and sculptors, 'National Socialism has won over German creative artists. They belong to us and we to them'. The Nazis wanted the arts to project images of national strength and virility; the slightly more subtle program of the *zhdanovshchina* in the Soviet Union immediately after World War II was to inspire the war-weary Russian people with a mood of optimism and national reconstruction. In 1949 the arts commissar Andrei Zhdanov scolded Shostakovich and other composers for writing music in minor keys: as peoples' artists, what right did they have to lose themselves in melancholy and personal introspection? Their duty was to reaffirm confidence, and to turn the great patriotic victory of 1945 into something inspirational that the people could sing. In David Pownall's brilliant play *Master Class*, based on speeches and articles by the Soviet leaders, Stalin tells Shostakovich and Prokofiev: 'If you're a genius in the Soviet Union today you have terrible responsibilities'. Prokofiev's rueful reply: 'We are already servants of one compulsion, our work. What you are asking would put us into a double servitude' (Pownall, 1983:69-71).

In Western societies since World War II, artists have been inclined to take the lessons of the past rather lightly, and to give a generally uncritical welcome to the idea of state cultural patronage. When the Arts Council of Great Britain was set up in 1945 its first chairman, J. M. Keynes, hailed it as one of the most important cultural events in British history (*The Listener*, 12 July 1945). Literary intellectuals were all the more delighted and confident because they saw the Labour victory in the 1945 election as a triumph of intellectualism over Conservative philistinism: the Labour government, Cyril Connolly said, were 'people like ourselves who are "we", not "they" (Shelden, 1989:139); and there were the same high expectations among writers and artists in the USA when the National Endowment for the Arts was set up in 1965 under a Democrat administration.²

Australian *Zhdanovshchina*

In Australia since the 1960s — just when a high culture has begun to emerge and develop — central government has come blundering into the field, colliding with the delicate machinery of patronage, entangling itself in the subtle networks of appreciation and goodwill surrounding the arts, and putting forward all kinds of naive schemes for speeding up the cultural process. As Paul Keating explained, his government's *Creative Nation* statement of 1994 is the culmination of a series of 'cultural strategies' over the past 20 years. It is based partly on rhetoric about export earnings, the vast numbers of 'employees in the arts industry', and the injection of \$3 billion (or perhaps \$3 trillion) into the economy; and partly on cultural engineering, with distinct overtones of an Australian *zhdanovshchina* in which the government will 'pull the threads of our national life together' and 'lay the foundations of a new era'. Individual artists are to be 'strands in the rope' of a politically correct,

² The best comparative study is Cummings and Katz (1987).

self-consciously Australian, and, above all, unified national culture (*The Australian*, 19 October 1994).

Although *Creative Nation* claims that it 'does not attempt to impose a cultural landscape on Australia but to respond to one which is already in bloom', the organic development of the arts is evidently too slow — almost geological — a process to appeal to the Prime Minister. He has sown a packet of mixed seeds, covered them with a thick layer of fertiliser, and is now standing over the flower bed, bristling with impatience, shouting 'Grow, damn you! and make sure you all have Mabo stems and multicultural petals'.

Self-congratulatory functions like the launch of *Creative Nation* in October 1994 emphasise the tribal links between the Prime Minister's closest associates and the hierarchy of the Australia Council, the ABC, the arts journalists of the leading dailies, Australian Studies departments and centres in the universities, and the recipients of the larger Australia Council grants and Keating Fellowships. The Labor vision of Australian history and cultural development is translated immediately into Australia Council policy. In its guidelines to applicants for grants in 1994/95 the Council lays down priority areas for funding: multicultural authors and themes; women in literature (in practice this seems to include gay and lesbian writing); youth; and initiatives related to workers and the trade union movement: in effect, historical, biblical, classical and Napoleonic in modern dress. According to the general manager of the Australia Council, Michael Lynch, rapid social change, highlighted by the High Court's *Mabo* decision and the push for a republic, has presented the arts community with new opportunities and responsibilities.

Arts play a significant role in helping lead the country to a republic. . . I have got this appointment for five years to 1999 and I would certainly hope that what happens under my management of the Australia Council will progress the debate towards a republic. (*The Australian*, 24 June 1994)

Once again, an administrator invoking the responsibilities of artists and talking of the arts community as if it were something like a Soviet-style artists and writers union. One can't help expecting to see an official Exhibition of Degenerate Art, to expose those wretched *réfractaires* (Les Murray's name comes to mind) who persist with personal work that makes no approved contribution to the multicultural, indigenous, gender-aware and non-elitist Australian society of the future.

There has been surprisingly little resistance. Phillip Adams has argued that government sponsorship has not corrupted Australian intellectuals in any serious way. They may be ready to enrol under the banner of the new Australia, but, he says, it hasn't made the slightest difference to their habitual larrikinism: our poets, playwrights, film-makers and novelists are as cheeky as ever, 'as lively as ever, even pithier, more impertinent' (*The Australian*, 22 October 1994). This may have been true in the past, when the Australia Council funded some very independent and incorrect artists. But we are now engaged in a more purposeful drive towards national goals: the impression given by a good many inhabitants of Grantarctica is that

their cheekiness is mainly deployed against the Left's favourite targets. They are lively in their enthusiasm for Kakadu and their detestation of mining and forestry, pithy against sexists and homophobes, and impertinent against European high culture. Government subsidy, which is supposed to give creative artists the freedom to be unorthodox, to swim against the current, doesn't seem any more successful in this respect than the similar gift of academic tenure.

The 'arts community' has had no trouble in choosing between Labor and Liberal since the 1993 election, when the Liberals were foolhardy enough to say that they favoured trimming the bureaucracy of the Australia Council and reforming the ABC, either proposal being the equivalent of making a speech in Teheran casting doubt on the probity of the Prophet Muhammad; and there has never been any question that Labor is more reliable on gay rights issues. The current love affair with the Keating Government, however, has a more profound cause. Keating and his minister Michael Lee seem convinced that, within a generation, or even by 2001, writers and artists are capable of replacing the scruffy old Australian national identity with something more up-to-date and politically acceptable; and this exactly matches the yearning of many creative people (although not, generally, the more talented ones) to be recognised as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. As the American critic Joy Spurling notes with enthusiasm, avant-garde art is 'driven by a coherent political ideology that calls for a fundamental transformation of society'; reforming artists 'pound their messages home with the force and energy of anger. They rarely allow us to be diverted by aesthetic or formal considerations' (Spurling, 1992:230). Australia has a long history of this essentially political approach to art, running through the major literary magazines and going back at least to the famous 'Poetry Militant' lecture by Bernard O'Dowd in 1909 in which he urged his fellow poets to postpone aesthetic considerations to the millennium (presumably he meant 2001). The poet's tasks, he said, were 'to work usefully . . . to unveil frauds, to imbue the masses with high ideals, to awaken them to a sense of the wrongs they endured or inflicted . . . to promote wise rebellion and stimulate reconstruction'. The true subjects for poetry were politics, sex, science and social reform 'in this virgin and unhandicapped land of social experiments, embryonic democracy, and the Coming Race, Australia' (quoted in Serle, 1973:70-1). It might be Keating speaking, or Zhdanov. More recently, Australian theorists have been echoing the very popular American doctrine embodied in a manifesto of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991, that 'cutting-edge art', operating in its full freedom through government subsidy, is the most effective instrument for undermining European male culture, empowering the disadvantaged, transforming public consciousness and releasing the energy of a truly national culture.

So the arts industry in Australia is likely in future to be a more rock-solid Labor constituency than the maritime unions. The fawning on Paul Keating himself since *Creative Nation* has been astonishing, unprecedented in Australian cultural history. Even the usually PC 'Arts and Minds' columnist of *The Australian* was disconcerted by the scene at the opening of the 1994 Melbourne Festival when Jeff Kennett, whose government had financed the Festival, was booed, and Keating, who had

done nothing tangible for it at all, was rapturously applauded, with people 'rushing up to more or less kiss his hand and pledge their loyalty' (*The Australian*, 22 October 1994). At some functions the more excited representatives of theatres, galleries and publishing firms have seemed on the verge of hailing the Prime Minister as Great Guide and Teacher, or Beloved Elder Brother. The Faustian contract has fallen due for payment.

The more thoughtful recipients of patronage may have noticed three implicit problems. First, not even the most self-confident regime lasts for ever. Second, the government's policy contains a fundamental contradiction. *Creative Nation* asserts that a line has been drawn, at last, under the colonial period; the cringe is over, and our creative people can walk tall on the world stage — they might even allow themselves a bit of strut and swagger. But at the same time they are never to shake off the legacy of guilt and unutterable shame left over from the colonial period. Some writers are obviously ready to accept Labor's bleak dismissal of the Anglo-Saxon past as a disgraceful episode in history, and would agree with Peter Carey's view that Australian society has grown 'out of the soil that starts with a convict economy, a concentration camp, genocide and all of that. You're the echo of a defeat culture' (quoted in *The Sunday Age*, 27 November 1994). But only the greatest moral athletes can walk tall while carrying a burden as heavy as this one.

Culture and Information Technology

The third problem for Australian intellectuals is more serious. Ideally, the government should be asking what it can do to develop Australia's rich printed literature and to protect it from being marginalised by the coming of electronic post-literacy. Instead, under the combined influence of information-technology zealots and of cultural-studies academics — some of the latter group have reservations about the very concept of 'authorship' — the Keating government has decided to put its money on the superficial glitz of multimedia and interactive CD-ROM, the antithesis and denial of print literature. There is one sensible proposal to use CD-ROM technology to put schools and rural areas in touch with developments in capital city galleries, theatres and concerts: in all other respects the intoxication with technology has the potential to create a cultural disaster. The priorities are clear enough: \$250,000 annually for the Academy of the Humanities, representing the most active scholars in history, philosophy and archaeology; about \$4m for all forms of print literature; \$84m over four years for culture on CD-ROM; \$60m for 'higher quality' television productions.

Literature arose out of letter-writing cultures. How will it fare when the medium of communication is the constantly mutating patois of e-mail and the Internet? And who will be bothered to read David Malouf or Helen Garner on a computer screen? The government is endorsing a culture of 'virtual libraries' and multimedia resource centres in which 'readers' will be able to choose whatever controlled mental adventures the CD-ROM programmers have chosen for them. A literate age is being re-tooled for the second Gutenberg revolution, when attention spans may not be long enough for reading Australian novels. There is a further

irony: although *Creative Nation* implies a commitment to defend a distinctively Australian culture from the homogeneity of the international mass media, how much electronic material will be distinctively Australian, beyond the usual gestures towards indigenous arts? Inescapably, a great deal of the knowledge and culture available on CD-ROM in the next ten years is going to have an American or Japanese flavour.

Would a change of government make any difference to the system of patronage? Probably not. The Liberals are just as fascinated as Labor by the information superhighway. Arts bureaucracies will continue to expand under any government. In proportion to population, Australia now has four times as many arts administrators on the federal payroll as the United States; given the level of public service salaries it is better to be an arts bureaucrat than a novelist or a painter, and this is unlikely to change under a Liberal-National Coalition government.

The NWT A Problem

Government involvement in anything means rule by committees; and a committee distributing taxpayers' money has to concern itself with gender and geographical balance, and all kinds of equity issues that a private patron can afford to ignore. Arts committees are further constrained by having to accommodate the concept of peer review. This is a process that works reasonably well in sport but hardly anywhere else, and especially not in the arts. Peers are the last people to give an impartial analysis of an artist's talent. When Count Ferdinand von Waldstein wanted to commission a piano sonata from Beethoven, he did not consult Beethoven's peers. In practice, 'hands-off peer review' on official committees is a merciless battle of groupuscules in which the spokespersons for the most PC trend usually win, because the other members are afflicted with a widespread disease of committees, NWT A — Not Wishing To Appear ignorant, insensitive, old-fashioned, or just old. Nobody on an arts committee wants to sound like the purblind philistines who said that Wagner had no talent or that Picasso couldn't draw; so there is a general readiness to be persuaded by enthusiasts for the officially approved trend of the moment, and a consistent record of committees backing wrong horses, as a glance at the lists of winners of the Turner Prize, the Prix Goncourt and the Nobel Prize for Literature will confirm. The tendency of committees to vote for the work of a politically-correct avant-garde has filled the second-hand bookshops in Western countries with unreadable novels, stacked the cellars of galleries with paintings which defy all attempts to sell them or give them away, and financed innumerable world premieres of music which, as the phrase goes, 'failed to enter the repertoire'.

Since the late 1980s there has been a reaction in several countries against the whole principle of official funding for the arts, provoked by some bizarre excesses like the decision by the French ministry of fine arts to commission a sculptor to desecrate the magnificent courtyard of the Palais Royale with hundreds of black-and-white stone blocks, and the choice of Damien Hirst's exhibit of a dead cow and calf floating in formaldehyde as an official British entry at the Venice Biennale. In 1990 there was a very well-informed debate in the US Congress (the kind of debate

on the arts unknown in the Australian parliament) on the fundamental question of whether taxpayers should be required to subsidise art and music chosen by 'cutting edge' advisers to the National Endowment for the Arts, which the average taxpayer will never learn to like and which even relatively sophisticated and experienced art-lovers find boring or repellent. With Congress now dominated by conservative Republicans, the NEA may not be able to survive as a patron of avant-garde art.

Arts funding bodies have to deal with a touchy and fractious clientele, and cannot be expected to please everybody. Some complaints about the operations of the Australia Council have been unjustified or trivial; but it is not easy to brush off the steady crescendo of criticism over the past seven or eight years, much of it coming from very distinguished people in Australian intellectual life. In 1994 an Australia Council Reform Association (ACRA) appeared, organised by two excellent poets, Les Murray and Mark O'Connor, with the support of a number of artists and arts journalists who have managed to resist the tide of euphoria since *Creative Nation*. The ACRA's entertaining and corrosive newsletter has criticised the Council's hasty and sometimes inexperienced decision-making, its symbiotic links with the Labor Party, the cosiness of arrangements under which the recipients of grants, wearing other hats, can sit on advisory and funding committees, and the award of large subsidies, extending over many years, to already well-off and successful artists.

The most fundamental complaint, however, has been that government funding distorts the relationship an artist should have with an informed public. This has nothing to do with the Zhdanovian concept of 'responsibility to the people'. The point is that official patronage disrupts a natural process by which creative work appeals in the first instance to a few individual patrons with knowledge and flair and then, in time, to a wider circle of discerning people who are willing to pay for new work, and whose support will guarantee the artist an income. Under the present system there is more incentive for artists to please the Australia Council and the government than to please any kind of genuine public. It is curious that artists who express admiration for indigenous art because they believe that 'it arises naturally to satisfy the needs of the people' become irritated if it is suggested that their own work should appeal to anyone at all. As the painter Jenny Watson said in 1982, 'I know there is something wrong if people like your work; that is the most upsetting thing for an artist . . . the best thing is to shock and make people feel uneasy' (*The Independent Monthly*, November 1994). But there are very few artists who would take the risk of making the Australia Council feel uneasy.

Subsidising the Patrons

The present policy does require applicants for grants in most areas to have made some effort to be commercially viable; but the first step towards restoring a real nexus between artist and public would be to move away from the Australia Council model of funding by committees, and to support the arts not by making direct payments to artists, theatre companies and publishers, but by subsidising the patrons. The purchase of books by Australian authors, works of art bought at exhibitions or directly from the artist, and theatre and concert tickets could be made fully tax-

deductible, with a more generous system of tax rebates for patrons who donate substantial amounts to orchestras, galleries or publishing ventures. On the artists' side, royalties and the proceeds of sales of work could be free of income tax, and should not affect entitlement to social services. There would be no need for peer-review committees, and it would be much easier for creative artists to earn a living, provided that their work had some appeal at least to a discerning minority. One further long-term contribution to the intellectual development of Australia, which might also counteract to some extent the effects of a passive electronic culture, would be to distribute more money in three directions: to help civic patronage to flourish and to make its own decisions; to increase the number of magazines willing to publish creative writing; and to subsidise the cost of musical instruments, art materials, and lessons in music and painting. The ultimate aim would be to use public money so as to stimulate an active culture, and at the same time to release the arts from the clammy grip of central government.

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