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COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. W. McMAHON, M.P.
Prime Minister

ON

THE ARTS IN AUSTRALIA
Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 26 October 1971]

Mr McMAHON (Lowe—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Acting Speaker, in recent years my Government and its predecessors have given greatly increased support to the arts in Australia. The response has been most encouraging. As a result, our policy on the arts and the interpretation of action taken or not taken by the Government have attracted a good deal of attention from honourable members as well as from the media and the public. It is timely, therefore to give to the House a fresh appreciation of our attitude to the arts. It is proper for me to clarify some aspects of our involvement which have been under discussion in recent weeks. The Government sees the arts in a multitude of expressions and forms—not as an adornment but as an integral part of life; not something exclusive to the hours of leisure but as a force, penetrating and enriching every aspect of human affairs; not as the preserve of the rich and the sophisticated but as a source of delight for all.

The arts are among the factors which go to create a quality of life unique in Australia. In the past we may have been inclined to stress the physical and material satisfactions of life at the expense of the pleasures of the creative imagination. And as a result many talented Australians who wished to be painters or writers, actors or dancers, musicians or film directors have had to leave Australia to build a career in a

more sympathetic artistic climate elsewhere. We could not afford this leaching of our society any more than we can now afford to allow our incomparable environment to be despoiled and polluted by lack of foresight and conscience. But, with the growing cultural awareness of the Australian society and because of support provided by governments, the opportunities for talented Australians to pursue a professional career in this country have been increased significantly in recent years. While there is still much to be done, novelists and poets, painters and sculptors can now command a better market as professionals here and abroad than they could do not so many years ago.

The Australian Opera Company, the Australian Ballet Company, the State drama companies, the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Australian Elizabethan Trust orchestras, and many other smaller companies, all now employ artists on a continuing basis, and they attract back to Australia artists who, having gone abroad for further experience, wish to return and work in their own country. This flow will increase as time goes by and bring great stimulus and enrichment to the daily life of all Australians.

The effectiveness of policy in relation to the arts of course will depend in part on the vitality and wisdom of the institutions set up to administer it. In the Commonwealth,

overall responsibility for the arts has been placed by me with the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts (Mr Howson). This Ministry was created to take over from the Prime Minister policy issues of increasing importance on a variety of matters which demanded more sustained attention than it was possible for him to give. Nevertheless, I find a certain logic in the combination.

The Minister's responsibilities are all in different ways concerned with the quality of life which opens out before the Australian people. It is increasingly clear that the superb natural environment which this continent provides for human life can no longer be taken for granted. It must be protected with understanding and with care. If, as I have said, the arts should be deeply integrated into our lives, they too form part of the intellectual and cultural environment within which our lives are lived—offering diversity of experience and lending form and substance to our personal and natural identity. Aboriginal Australians are an unqualified responsibility of governments—a challenge to our conscience and to our political and social wisdom.

There is, particularly in relation to the environment and the arts, much that we can learn from them. For tens of thousands of years they have inhabited this continent, living in harmony with it and its creatures. They established a way of life in which the arts, of music, dance, theatre and ritual were woven into the texture of their daily lives. It is indeed a happy combination of responsibilities which I am sure will give the Minister and his advisers great stimulus and satisfaction. In the past, when responsibility for the arts lay with the Prime Minister, several separate bodies were set up and were responsible for advising him on various aspects of the arts. They continue to this day and now advise the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts.

The Commonwealth Literary Fund had its own advisory committee. In the building up of the national collection of works of art and on many related matters the Prime Minister was assisted by the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board. Advice on the needs of composers has been provided by the Board of the Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers. In the field of the performing arts help was given by

the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, a private corporation supported by Government funds. In recent years several major institutional developments have occurred including the establishment of the Australian Council for the Arts, the completion of the National Library, and the decision to begin planning a National Gallery for Canberra. More recently the Government established 2 new organisations in the field of film and television, the Film Development Corporation and the Interim Council of the Australian Film and Television Training School.

Apart from these bodies, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, through its symphony orchestras, television and radio programmes, has continued to exercise powerful direct effects on the content and style of the performing arts. The Government has now, therefore, a range of organisations, advisory and executive, to assist it to form and give effect to policies for the support of the arts. The time, therefore, may be ripe to review the structure of these bodies and their relationship to one another so that they can best promote the vigour and diversity of Australian artistic life. When the late Mr Holt announced the Government's decision to set up an Australian Council for the Arts he said it would be responsible primarily for the performing arts, but would also have the task of advising the Government on those aspects of the arts not receiving aid through existing channels. He said also that the establishment of the Council did not preclude the possibility of an overall council responsible for all aspects of Government support for the arts along the lines of the Canada Council and the Arts Council of Great Britain. Support has also been expressed for a comprehensive ministry of culture in the style common among European countries.

During the last two or three years the Council for the Arts and other advisers have given thought to these possibilities. After consultation with them, I am inclined to distrust the idea of a single monolithic controller of public patronage. With all its faults I believe that our pattern of various channels of support, with scope for varied artistic and social influences, is almost certainly healthier. Nevertheless the arts are in a perpetual process of change and are unlikely long to fit a pattern of institutions

evolved slowly over many years. New art forms emerge under the stimulus of technological change which do not fall readily within accepted classifications.

One of the most exciting aspects of contemporary cultural life is the cross-fertilisation which now occurs between different art forms, a process greatly stimulated by developments in film and electronic processes. It is important, therefore, firstly, that the organisational structure should be flexible and capable of adapting itself to change and, secondly, that the state of the arts should continuously be studied so that, where necessary, gaps may be filled, collaboration ensured and new initiatives stimulated. My colleague, the Minister, tells me that he intends shortly, and thereafter at intervals, to bring together the Chairmen of the various Commonwealth agencies in the arts to discuss their present responsibilities and relationships one to the other. This will be a valuable opportunity for them to offer their advice on the effectiveness of the present structure to meet the changing demands of contemporary art forms.

It will continue to be the function of the Council for the Arts to study and report on those aspects of the arts which are not assisted through existing Commonwealth agencies and to make its contribution to advice available to the Minister on the balance and effectiveness of our programmes as a whole. It was in pursuit of these functions that the Council presented my predecessor with a report which led to major developments in the field of film and television to which I shall return later.

More recently a study of the state of music in Australia has been completed and the Council will shortly be presenting my colleague with its recommendations arising from that study. Two additional studies will be undertaken this year by committees to be established by the Minister. The first of these will examine the role of crafts as art forms in their own right, as a widely spread experience of creative processes and as the foundation of good industrial design. The committee will include representatives of the Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board and the Council for Industrial Design who will jointly advise on the committee's terms of reference.

The second will concern itself with means whereby children and young people can be helped to enjoy and practise the arts more effectively. The chairmen of the Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Assistance to Australian Composers Advisory Board, the Commonwealth Literary Fund and the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board will jointly advise on the terms of reference of this study which will also involve educational authorities. Special attention will be given in these and other future studies to the effect of innovation in art forms and the mutual stimulus they can provide for one another.

Before leaving areas of the arts for which the Council is responsible, let me comment on the increased support for the performing arts being given this year. The grant has been increased by almost 17 per cent to \$4.5m. The greater part of the increase has been given deliberately to the Australian Opera and to the orchestras of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Their share has been increased by 45 per cent to \$1,290,000. Some critics have seen this as an example of discrimination or favouritism. The Government believes that increased support for the arts cannot sensibly be given uniformly across the board. That way, no large development can ever be achieved, given the competitive pressures on Government funds. It is more effective to seize opportunities for major break-throughs as they are offered by the occasion or by some other stimulus to innovation.

In 1973 the opening of the Sydney Opera House will give Australia the chance to match the splendour of that building with performances which will be worthy of it and of the long association of Australians with this art form. The Government makes no apology for the emphasis it has this year given to strengthening the opera company and its associated orchestra. Their success will set new standards for all the arts and I am sure that the special occasion for others will be not far distant. Those who love the arts will rejoice that Australian opera has been given an effective opportunity to set new standards of excellence.

Let me turn now to developments in the visual arts. As honourable members know, the first steps have been taken to establish

a national gallery. Over many years the Art Advisory Board has built up in the gallery an historical collection of the works of Australian painters of the past and the present. It will also incorporate outstanding examples of the work of indigenous artists of New Guinea and aboriginal Australia, art of the South-East Asian and Pacific region and art on a world-wide basis, beginning with the 20th century.

The gallery will be more than the home for a unique and splendid collection of works of art. Its functions are broadly conceived so that it will become also a centre of creative activity for the exhibition of collections from abroad and of the work of contemporary artists, and a focus of education and research exercising, in collaboration with sister galleries in the States, a profound and pervasive influence on the life of Australians.

When the decision to proceed with gallery planning was taken in 1967 an interim council was appointed to administer certain aspects of the initial programme. Its terms of office expired recently and it is the Government's intention now to legislate for a permanent council as a statutory body to administer the gallery. Much, of course, will depend on the gallery's first Director. I am pleased to announce tonight that the Government proposes to appoint Mr James Mollison to the post. Pending the submission of the legislation and the establishment of the statutory office, Mr Mollison has agreed to make his services available under contract to the Government to carry out the duties and responsibilities that will fall to the director of the gallery. The Government has deliberately chosen in Mr Mollison one who is young as well as talented and experienced. It will be some years before the building of the gallery is complete and its work in full flower. By then the new director will have grown with it in stature and have benefited from the experience of others in Australia and abroad.

The Government is fortunate also that Mr James Sweeney, the eminent American Gallery Director and international art and gallery consultant, has agreed to work with the new director and the architect during the present design phase of the gallery. He will work as a specialist consultant and adviser to the Government and the

National Capital Development Commission which has charge of the whole project. Mr Sweeney has already given distinguished service to the Government and the National Capital Development Commission and we value highly the contribution he has already made to the preparatory phase of work in the gallery. Honourable members will share, I am sure, my appreciation of his work and his readiness to continue to assist us. I should also add that when the permanent council for the gallery is appointed the Art Advisory Board to which I have already referred will become part of the council. The Art Advisory Board will also perform those other functions it now exercises which are not directly concerned with the gallery.

Mr Acting Speaker, I come now to the film and television industry. When the Council for the Arts presented its report for the development of the film and television industry it urged the establishment of 3 new institutions—the Australian Film Development Corporation, the Experimental Film Fund and the Australian Film and Television School. The Australian Film Development Corporation is actively at work and a number of investments have been made. The Corporation was designed to serve as a source of part of the capital needed for commercial film and television ventures, and thus act as a catalyst for funds from private and banking sources.

The Government looks, however, to other sections of the film and television industry to share more actively with the Corporation the development of an effective Australian industry. The Experimental Film Fund has, until recently, been the responsibility of the Australian Council for the Arts. It has already proved effective in identifying original creative talent in this medium. The Council has also developed a more general programme to stimulate the Australian content of film and television programmes and to extend sensitive and critical appreciation of high quality film and television. Responsibility for these programmes will now be taken over by the Interim Council for the Film and Television School as has been announced by the Minister. It was partly with these new responsibilities in mind that the Government has decided to add to the Interim Council 2 men long experienced in radio, television and film making. They are Mr

Hector Crawford and Mr Lenard Mauger. Their knowledge will be, I am sure, of great value in helping us to promote plans for the development of the film industry.

There has been a good deal of misunderstanding of the Government's attitude towards the question of assistance for training of film and television producers. The Government decided at Budget time to defer consideration of a proposal to establish a training school for this purpose.

It was one of a number of proposals over the range of Government activity on which consideration was deferred because of the need to restrict Government expenditure. This does not mean that the Government has abandoned the idea of establishing a training school. In this House on 26 October I informed honourable members that I had instructed the Minister to proceed as quickly as possible to collect all the evidence that becomes available to him so that the proposal could be presented to the Government well before the next Budget and not necessarily, therefore, in a Budget context. He is doing this.

The current position is that the enlarged Interim Council to which I have just referred has been asked to review the relationship of the training already undertaken by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the commercial television organisations and the film industry to the programme of the proposed school. It will seek the co-operation of those interested for this review. When it has received this report the Government will then consider the most appropriate way in which it might act to assist the industry in this important area.

In addition to the institutional developments recommended to and adopted by the Government, the Council for the Arts drew attention to the need of the Australian film industry for some degree of protection to establish itself on the Australian market. The Council suggested that advice on this matter should be sought from the Tariff Board or a specially constituted committee. Many other countries have found it necessary to establish quotas or to provide other

forms of protection to prevent their vigorous but infant film industry being overwhelmed by imported features. I have therefore asked my colleague, the Minister for Trade and Industry, to invite the Tariff Board to consider the need and appropriate form of protection for this industry. He has agreed to do this and in due course the Tariff Board will begin its work. I should also remind honourable members that the Government has done much to advance the cause of the Arts by ensuring that the Australian Broadcasting Commission and, through the Broadcasting Control Board, the commercial stations, give a substantial percentage of their viewing time to Australian made programmes. Under recently specified new requirements commercial stations have increased their quotas of Australian programmes. All stations which have been established for 3 years or more must televise at least 50 per cent of Australian programmes, and 45 per cent of peak-time programmes between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. must be Australian in content. Audience surveys in recent years show that some Australian programmes are getting top ratings.

There remains much of the more detailed work in support of the arts of which my colleague, the Minister, will tell the House at the appropriate time. This statement has been designed to express my Government's deep concern for the arts as an essential and vigorous component of our national life; to acquaint the House with the principles which underlie our organisation for making that concern effective; and to inform the House of certain initiatives which will, I am sure, be welcomed inside and outside Parliament by those who share our belief that the arts can add both richness and diversity to the quality of life. Mr Acting Speaker, I commend this statement to you. I present the following paper:

The Arts in Australia—Ministerial Statement, 26th October 1971.

Motion (by Mr Swartz) proposed:

That the House take note of the paper.