

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, HON. E.G. WHITLAM,
Q.C., M.P., IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON 24
MAY, 1973, IN PRESENTING THE INTERIM REPORT OF THE
AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

Mr. Speaker,

For the information of Honourable Members, I present the interim report which I have received from the Australian Council for the Arts.

I ask leave of the House to make a brief statement on this matter.

Sir, in my Policy Speech I indicated that a Labor Party Government would provide substantially increased support for the arts. This support would relate to a two-fold objective - the pursuit of excellence and the spread of participation in the arts. We also proposed to extend the range and effectiveness of that support by setting up a new and independent Council based on a series of specialist Boards dealing with different art forms.

When my Government took office, action was taken immediately to give effect to these policies. At the same time it was important to honour commitments already entered into by the previous Government so that there would be no interruption to work already in progress and planned. Furthermore, it was necessary to get responsible estimates for the increased activities envisaged and to prepare legislation for the new Council structure. I therefore decided to appoint the new Council (and its constituent Boards) to undertake these tasks.

On 26th January a Council of 24 was appointed, including the Chairmen of the constituent Boards and others capable of providing special knowledge of the arts and of the needs of the community in this field. On 16th February, after receiving advice from the Chairmen based on consultations in their respective fields,

I appointed the members of Boards dealing with Theatre, Music, Visual Arts, Crafts, Literature, and Film and Television. The Aboriginal Arts Board was appointed later.

I asked the Council to see that existing support for the arts was not disrupted; to prepare for me a charter for the new organization and an outline of its operations which would serve as a basis for legislation; and to let me have urgently budgetary estimates for the coming year.

These initial arrangements were very flexible. Appointments to the Council and Boards were for terms of no more than one or two years to allow for change and development and to ensure that the membership could quickly be adapted to any changes in the structure which might arise from the report of the Council.

The Boards have met a number of times. Some, in defining the scope of their work, have already proposed to move into new areas, to plan further ahead, and to tackle long-standing issues of importance to Australian artists such as the Public Lending Right and copyright. Proposals to extend public enjoyment of and participation in the arts, to raise the status of artists in the community and to explore means of opening doorways to the arts for young people have also received prompt attention.

The Council has now put together this preliminary report outlining how, in its view, it and the Boards might operate. The report is based upon the broad objectives of Government policy and defines the purposes of the Council and its powers and responsibilities as a statutory corporation. In accordance with the Government's policies, it provides that the powers of the Council

should be used in ways which will "respect, uphold and promote the rights of artists to untrammelled freedom in the practice of their arts".

In defining the structure of the Council and Boards and their inter-related procedures, the report aims to ensure that artists and others active in the arts are predominant in the proposed membership, while ensuring adequate consideration of the interests of the public generally.

The report is not final. The Council has asked me to authorise its release - along with notes on some of the main areas of differing opinion - to organizations and persons interested. I have told the Council that I am happy to invite organizations and persons with a special interest in the arts freely to express their views on the proposals.

Mr Speaker, I welcome the opportunity which this preliminary report presents to reaffirm the importance which my Government attaches to the arts. The legislation which will follow the Council's final report will be designed not merely to improve the material conditions of those engaged in them and to widen the range of those who participate but to guarantee to the arts the independence without which they cannot flourish. Around the world there are great writers whose works never see the light of day in their own countries, painters obliged to bend their talents to political dictation, creative talent crippled by censorship and control. The legislation will, we hope, be seen as a charter to safeguard the integrity of our artists and their works.

I hope, therefore, that honourable members, as individuals and as members of appropriate committees of this Parliament, will study this interim report that we may have the benefit of their wisdom as well as that of all those Australians who value the arts and see in them, as does my Government, a means to the enrichment of life for all Australians.

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