

24  
26

NATIONAL GALLERY BILL 1975  
SECOND READING SPEECH

BY  
THE HONOURABLE E. G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
PRIME MINISTER

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The purpose of the Bill is to establish an Australian National Gallery in the national capital to develop, maintain and exhibit a national collection of works of art and to provide an art focus for the whole Australian community.

Like the Australia Council Bill, this is another historic initiative taken by the present Government to promote interest and activity in the arts in Australia. Our intention to introduce this legislation was announced in the Governor-General's Speech at the opening of Parliament on 27 February 1973 and again in the Speech by Her Majesty The Queen on 28 February 1974. Our commitment was reiterated in the Policy Speech for the 1974 election and confirmed in the Governor-General's Speech on 9 July 1974.

Honourable members will be aware of my longstanding interest in a National Gallery and the Hansard record of my questions over many years stands testimony to my concern about the growth of our national collection of works of art.

I shall not dwell on the chequered history of the idea of a National Gallery but it is worth remembering that it is as old as the master plan for the national capital itself. Provision for it appeared in the list of requirements prepared for competitors submitting designs for the future city and Walter Burley Griffin in his own plan allowed for two such institutions.

For a time the idea was obscured by depression, war and the other great forces which were reshaping Australian society; but the vision was not lost and it was the force and vigour of Sir Daryl Lindsay, in particular, which once more brought it to the fore.

On 10 September 1965 the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, announced the establishment of a National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry under the Chairmanship of Sir Daryl Lindsay. The Committee's report was presented to the new Prime Minister, Mr Holt, on 14 March 1966. Mr Holt tabled it and paid tribute to it in a ministerial statement on 1 November 1967. The report recommended as the basis for all else that the Gallery be given statutory authority. The committee suggested that construction of the gallery might commence when the National Library was due for completion during 1968 and hoped that the opening of the gallery in 1970 would be a fitting means of recognising in the National Capital the 200th anniversary of the discovery of eastern Australia by Captain Cook.

On 26 October 1971 the then Prime Minister, Mr McMahon, announced his Government's intention to legislate for a permanent Council as a statutory body to administer the Gallery. He also announced at that time his Government's intention to appoint Mr James Mollison as the Gallery's first director.

The design of a Gallery building was entrusted to Edwards, Madigan, Torzillo and Briggs Pty. Ltd., architects and town planners of Sydney. A contract for construction of the building was issued by my government in April 1973, and on 7 November of that year I unveiled a foundation plaque commemorating the beginning of construction on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin nearby.

A fine gallery building is not, however, an end in itself. In the final analysis, an institution is judged by what it offers and how effectively it does this, and in large measure this will depend upon the soundness of the principles on which it is based and the quality of the people who run it.

The Australian Government believes that the National Gallery Bill 1975 represents the best basis devised to this time for such an institution in our kind of society.

It will be an independent statutory authority in many respects similar to the National Library of Australia. It will be responsible for the national collection of works of art and be expected to make the most advantageous use of the collection in the national interest.

The affairs of the Gallery will be conducted by a Council, including the Director of the Gallery, and not more than 10 other members chosen with regard to their knowledge and experience with respect to the visual arts or other areas of knowledge relevant to the affairs of the Gallery. It is in mind that there should always be a proper blend of the artistic and other interests most likely to optimize the effectiveness of the institution.

A novel feature of the Bill is that it provides for two statutory offices, the Director of the Australian National Gallery and the Secretary and Manager of the Gallery. The Director shall have overall responsibility to the Council for the running of the Gallery and its artistic direction, and the Secretary and Manager shall, under the Director, manage the day-to-day administration of the affairs of the Gallery and act as secretary to the Council. This provision

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has been introduced to avoid the problems which have arisen so often elsewhere, where unlikely and unreasonable combinations of different expertise and experience have been demanded of the one person, usually with unfortunate results. It is hoped that by this means there will always be a proper complement of artistic and administrative skills with the most satisfactory use being made of what each office-holder is best able to offer.

The Gallery will engage its own staff on terms and conditions determined by the Council but subject to the approval of the Public Service Board. This measure of flexibility is seen as essential to allow the Gallery to obtain the services of the best professional staff available whether in Australia or overseas, whether from other galleries or from universities or other areas.

In its financial affairs the Gallery will operate in much the same way as most other statutory authorities. It will be required to submit estimates to the Minister in the normal way and it will be funded by annual appropriation. It will operate its own bank accounts, but it will be required to keep proper accounts and records of its affairs which will be subject to inspection and audit by the Auditor-General. It will also prepare annual reports to the Minister which will be tabled in Parliament.

I shall not go into other features of the Bill here; I believe that altogether they will ensure the proper control and accountability of one of the nation's important cultural institutions, while at the same time providing the vital elements of independence and flexibility which the institution requires to achieve the greatest measure of effectiveness.

Much has been said over the last year or two about some of the Gallery's acquisitions of contemporary art from overseas. On balance, I think this has been for the good. Many art-interested Australians have been obliged to reconsider some of their values and tastes and I believe that this is a salutary experience for us all every once in a while. I should like to remind honourable members, however, that the Gallery's collection is indeed not confined to contemporary art from overseas.

In the view of the Director, the Gallery possesses close to the finest, balanced collection of Australian art anywhere in the country and it is virtually complete to this time. It is building a fine collection of primitive art based primarily on Pacific and African cultures. It is not neglecting the arts of our neighbours in Asia and the Far East nor the early civilizations of South America. The Gallery is assembling a major collection of graphic arts, and it already possesses the very fine Felix Man collection of lithographs tracing that art form from its very origins to recent times. A great sculpture collection is also being developed.

No Australian artist of importance has been neglected, and names like Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, Honore Daumier, Auguste Rodin and Giambattista Tiepolo should leave no doubt that the Gallery is seeking the best of more than one period or place.

We have here the beginnings of an institution which it is my hope, and the Government's, will be a source of pleasure and artistic stimulation for generations of Australians to come, a worthy addition to our growing national heritage, and an endeavour in which we might all take pride.

I commend the Bill to the House.