

ARTS ACTION AUSTRALIA

CALL FOR A NATIONAL AGENDA

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

MONDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 1990

THE ARTS - AUSTRALIA'S GOLD, GOLD, GOLD

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Justice Michael Kirby\*

"Where shall we go? Where shall we go? -  
We shall go to the Museum  
What shall we see? Is there lots to see? -  
We shall see rooms full of treasures."

Thomas W Shapcott, "June Fugue", in the New  
Oxford Book of Australian Verse, 281.

A FRAGILE TIME IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

We meet at a very interesting time in Australian politics. It is not often that artists, and the citizens who support them, show the political skills of predicting the election date with uncanny accuracy. It is not often that they get such a chance to fashion the political agenda. Yet, with remarkable timing, here we are at the brink of the great recurring electoral celebration of our democracy. The political manifestos are being drafted with desperate urgency. Warbling jingles are being composed to

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\* Personal views.

assault our ears. We - artists and citizens - have a chance to help call the tune.

The moment reached in our nation's affairs is politically fragile. Opinion polls, virtually uniformly, show a great disillusionment with the major political groupings. The politicians acknowledge this themselves. Incredibly enough, according to a poll published yesterday, a third of our fellow citizens are disillusioned with both major parties and as yet undecided as to how to vote. This is the moment that artists in Australia, and their supporters, have been waiting for. It is a moment when we other-worldly spirits must show rare political skills. The object, in a word, is nothing less than to influence the programmes of the political parties in favour of a fresh and imaginative agenda for the arts in Australia. But how will we do this in the age of economic rationalism? How do we, with our diverse interests and objectives, rally together to influence the politicians to see the new importance of the arts for the politics of Australia?

Convincing the politicians of the importance of the economy, interest rates, drugs, truckies and even the environment is easy. They know that. These subjects need no words from us. But how can we convince them that the coming wave for the political agenda is the state of the arts? That is the question I pose today. For the purposes of our meeting, there is no question more important. If we can get the answer to that question right, we can seize the moment

and offer a winner's crown to the politicians who listen to us. More importantly, we can thereby help to influence the civilisation of Australia and the creative life of everyone living here.

#### SIX REASONS WHY THE ARTS MEAN VOTES

I have six reasons to offer to our politicians as to why they should give priority of attention to the arts and arts funding in this election.

\* The winning politician is perceptive, or lucky, enough to see the winning issue on the horizon. When the "Greens" campaigned on the issue of the environment in the Tasmanian elections, the pundits and economists scoffed at them. But it was the Greens who were in tune with the people. The "experts" were not. On the arts, there is a similar lack of appreciation of the strength of public feeling and commitment. How can we bring this error home to politicians? By constantly repeating, during the coming weeks, a few simple statistics:

\*\* More than 60,000 Australians are employed in the arts;

\*\* The arts contribute more than \$10 billion annually to the Australian economy - more than insurance and

- cosmetics. More even than then the  
beer of Mr Elliott and Mr Bond;
- \*\* The industry has grown by more than  
20% in the past 5 years;
  - \*\* It is a labour intensive industry -  
providing many new jobs;
  - \*\* Surveys show that more than 90% of  
Australians recognise and approve of  
government funding of the arts;
  - \*\* The level of funding approved by  
Australians, if adopted by  
government, would double or triple  
the present public subventions;
  - \*\* In another poll 58% of Australians  
said that there should be more of  
the arts on television. You will  
find it hard to believe it but 8%  
said that there was a need for more  
sport; and
  - \*\* 60% believed that the arts are for  
the benefit of all Australians.  
Only 10% saw the arts as the  
possession of the elite few.

At a time of disillusionment, the politician who  
appeals to things of the spirit will carry the  
day. The physical environment is such an  
issue. But the intellectual environment of the

arts is also.

\* Self interest is the next reason. Perhaps, in politics, it should have been the first. In an electorate with a large swinging vote, it will only be the politician with imagination who will capture the bored and listless mind of the cynical, disillusioned swinging voter. Such politicians should be alert to the changes that are happening in our country. Some of those changes have themselves been influenced by public funding of the arts in the past 20 years. Opera in the Park attracts an audience of thousands - even when rain threatens. It demonstrates that it is not the arts in Australia that are elitist but the prices of tickets. The Chinese exhibition was seen by 1 in every 28 Australians. In Adelaide it was actually 1 in 8. The telecast of Die Fledermaus reached an audience of 2.5 million Australians. The simulcast of Sutherland and Pavarotti reached 6.5 million. These figures bear out survey research which shows that 65% of Australians enjoy classical music and regularly play it at home. That may shatter a few stereotypes. Stereotypes about the arts must be destroyed if this issue is to have its proper place in the political agenda of this country.

\* Then there is the appeal to nationalism. For my own part, I am an internationalist. And the arts are international. But Australia must make its contribution. We have special opportunities to do so. We have the unique arts of the Aboriginal people of Australia including in their modern manifestation in the poetry of Oodjeroo (Kath Walker) and successful rock bands. Our multicultural diversity is unequalled almost anywhere in the world. From it comes a symphony of contributions to our cultural life. The images of Australia are fixed by its creative artists as well as by sports men and women. In the Bicentenary, we saw many politicians jump on the nationalistic bandwagon. Well, the arts in Australia are a proper cause for national pride. They are one of the best features of our nationalism: creative Australians creating for the world. We should have cultural centres in key overseas postings to shatter the Ocker stereotypes and to project Australia as we know it - as it really is. Surveys show that Australians put musicians, actors and authors up there with sports stars at the very top of those who are thought to contribute to a favourable image of Australia overseas. Supporting such people can

therefore tap deep feelings of Australian national pride. So to politicians I say: Go for the nationalistic vote. You would not be the first politicians to do so.

\* Then there are the economic reasons. Our economy is changing. We are in a time of transition. Plainly new technology will alter the time people spend in work and the kind of work they do. The people realise this. Politicians who see the importance of filling the gaps in their lives with something more than soapies on television will seek out their interest. Tourism is now ailing because of the pilots' strike. But it will also affect the tourists if, when they get here, they find that the country is not sufficiently culturally interesting. There is only so much time you can spend in duty free shops. That is why the development of museums, and of a lively creative and artistic culture, is an indispensable part of the infrastructure of a successful tourist economy. Subvention of the arts is therefore an essential contribution to an industry we hope will grow. The new markets of Eastern Europe, for all their lack of consumer goods, can offer plenty in the arts. They are our competitors for tourists now. The politician who wants



Australia to develop the tourist industry, and not just dig up minerals or chop down trees, will look to see our economic future. There is nothing heretical in this. The most economically dry politicians are supporting the arts. That doyen of economic rationalists, Mrs Thatcher, supported an increase in the British Council subvention. And this is because of the clear-sighted realisation of the economic importance of the arts to the tourist industry of Britain. The successful economy of Germany is equally active in supporting the arts. So let it be in Australia.

\* Then there is an appeal to what I will call the Ozymandias factor.

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings  
Look on my works ye mighty and despair."

Every politician enters public life in the hope of leaving a mark. It may be a quest for personal immortality. It may be the sincere desire to improve the lot of fellow citizens. Or both. The arts present the politician with the chance to leave worthy monuments. Let them even name a building or two after the best of them. Today it is the cultural heritage of Ramses II, not his interest rates that are remembered. It is the flowering of literature

and music that lasts. There is a heresy abroad that we can leave support of the arts to the marketplace. It has never been so, least of all in Australia. The enduring artists of the past have always relied upon philanthropy and public support of one kind or another. The private market is unadventurous, frightened of new ideas. In Australia it is particularly mean. We must scotch this heresy as we must scotch the other one that artists do better on an empty stomach and in a Parisian garret. When in a thousand years time they dig up the area around the Rocks it will be the Opera House - this symbol of culture - that is found, not the duty free stores or the banks or insurance towers.

\* Finally there is an appeal to the idealism of politicians. Is it only in Havel's Czechoslovakia that leaders exist who are unembarrassed to proclaim their allegiance to the world of the spirit? It is for the advancement of that world that the National Agenda for the Arts in Australia has been prepared. The founding fathers of the American republic declared that the objects of good government were the protection of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". In the past, politics in Australia has been about the

subsistence of life and its preservation in war and peace. It has been about the defence of liberty and the improvement of our laws. Now, at last, it is coming to the pursuit of happiness.

Happiness comes in many forms. It comes in sports. It comes in modern forms of music and the theatre. There must be no narrow definition of the arts. It comes in theatre - as it did on the other side of Sydney Cove one year after Phillip first raised his flag in 1788. It comes in music and the performing arts, housed in this famous building.

#### WORDS FROM THE TOKEN CITIZEN - AN ARTS RATING

I am here as the token citizen. Sadly, no one could call the laboured prose of a judge creative art. But I speak today for the millions of fellow citizens of Australia who are not themselves artists - but who hold the artists of this country precious. In the past there has been too much division amongst artists about funding. There has been too much disputation about the share of the cake. Now the time has come to speak - artist and citizen - with one voice to our next government about its size. In times of unexpected peace and great opportunity, the issue for the future will be the quality of Australian life. The political issues of the 1990s will increasingly be the physical and cultural environment. The two go hand in hand. The time has come for the arts - and government attitudes to them - to be advanced

on the political agenda. As artists and citizens we must make it our business in the next five weeks to hammer this message home. And to test our politicians for their attitudes on the arts and on the national agenda which is launched today. Let us give them all an arts rating. And present that rating to the undecided voters who will determine Australia's government on the 24 March. The real gold, gold, gold of Australia is the treasure-house of its arts and culture. We must defend them, support them and nurture them.