

# Deafening silence on future arts policy



Kate Miller-Heidke performs at Byron Bay Bluesfest. The festival has been supported through the federal government's RISE fund. Picture: Lachlan Douglas

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The arts rarely make a showing in a federal election, and in the post-Covid, cost-of-living, small-target campaign, arts funding announcements from the two major parties are nowhere to be seen.

Federal Arts Minister Paul Fletcher has put in place Covid-assistance measures worth more than \$500m since 2020, and the government has been praised for avoiding a wipeout of arts and cultural organisations.

But the Coalition has not made any election pitches for the arts beyond measures announced in the budget, including a \$20m extension to the Covid- response RISE program.

Similarly, the ALP has been conspicuously silent on the arts during the campaign, apart from Anthony Albanese's Bluesfest promise to look into extending the reach of Double J, the ABC's digital Australian music station. Labor's arts spokesman, Tony Burke, may yet come out with an arts announcement before the election next Saturday.

The Greens is the only party so far to offer anything resembling a cultural policy, promising more than \$2.5bn worth of spending – including a pilot scheme for an “artist’s wage”.

At the same time, peak industry bodies Live Performance Australia and APRA AMCOS have renewed calls for assistance for the arts and entertainment sector after the pandemic badly hurt out revenue, investment streams and artist’s earnings.



Federal Arts Minister Paul Fletcher. Picture: John Appleyard

LPA’s Evelyn Richardson says the arts and entertainment industry continues to face strong headwinds, including an acute skills shortage and rising interest rates potentially hurting ticket-buyers.

“People’s disposable income is reduced ... and there may be some impact on the entertainment dollar,” she says. “We are going to be operating in a volatile environment over the next 12-24 months, and that presents challenges.”

Fletcher says the government is spending a record \$1bn on the arts and creative sector this financial year, including Covid-specific measures.

While the Coalition has not published a formal arts policy document, Fletcher says funding decisions through the RISE program – he approves the grants after advice from the Office for the Arts and the Australia Council – have been guided by his stated priority that the “arts are for all Australians”.

“We have been using RISE to give effect to that principle,” Fletcher says.

“It’s making sure that the funding doesn’t just go to companies based in our big cities or CBDs, but is going to arts in regional and remote Australia. That is a significant focus for us under RISE. Having articulated that as a principle, in my time as minister we have used the available funding tools and levers to give effect to that principle.”

RISE projects in the pipeline and yet to be announced will roll out over the next two years, Fletcher adds. But industry bodies say more must be done to help artists and arts businesses rebound from the pandemic.



Labor’s arts spokesman, Tony Burke. Picture: Gary Ramage/NCA NewsWire

Business interruption insurance and tax incentives are proposals contained in pre-election statements by LPA and APRA AMCOS, representing 16 music-industry bodies. A co-ordinated insurance scheme is necessary to protect businesses from

loss in the event of future lockdowns, LPA says, while tax incentives are needed to help drive investment in locally produced shows.

Both LPA and the music groups say investment in skills and retraining is essential for the industry that is facing a critical shortage of experienced staff, similar to the situation in other Covid-affected industries such as hospitality and tourism.

The screen production sector has been busy with foreign films including Thor: Love and Thunder and Godzilla vs Kong, lured to Australia by the government's \$540m location sweetener. Producers also have benefited from the \$50m temporary interruption fund, a funding boost for Screen Australia and a 10-point rise in the offset for small-screen drama production, including streamed content.

But Screen Producers Australia and others argue that global streaming giants including Netflix and Disney+ should be making a lot more Australian programs. Fletcher says the streaming services are required to spend at least 5 per cent of locally earned revenue on local production, but SPA and the Greens say the minimum obligation should be 20 per cent.

Some expensive policy ideas have been put forward by the Greens – including billion-dollar funds for live performance and Australian screen content – which a “billionaire's tax” would pay for. The Greens also have proposed piloting an artist's wage, paying 10,000 artists the minimum weekly wage of \$772.60 for a year. The idea is similar to a Covid-response scheme being rolled out in Ireland that will pay 2000 artists a weekly wage of €325, or \$492.

The Greens' Sarah Hanson-Young says artists would be paid to work on agreed programs, including as artists in residence in schools and libraries. She says the idea is to invest in the arts in local communities.





The Greens' arts spokeswoman, Sarah Hanson-Young

“Art is a public good, and the Greens fundamentally believe that,” she says. “If you don’t underpin the belief that art is itself a public good, then I don’t think you have a policy that puts community at the centre – which is where I believe all our policies should be.”

Australia lags behind other nations in public arts funding. Outlays across the three tiers of government were worth \$7.26bn in 2019-20, not including Covid support, according to arts think tank A New Approach.

But government spending has not kept pace with Australia’s population growth – per capita funding has declined by 6.9 per cent since 2007-08 – and arts expenditure as a share of gross domestic product is behind the OECD average.

Fund the Arts has argued for a \$2.5bn increase in arts funding, including programs for arts education in schools and a digital platform where Australian arts and culture can be made available to all Australians. While not a political party, Fund the Arts has hosted events in marginal seats including Kooyong, Wentworth and Boothby in an attempt to put the arts on the election agenda.

Melbourne academic Ben Eltham, a policy adviser to Fund the Arts, says the government deserves credit for helping see the arts sector through the pandemic, but more needs to be done.

“I think there’s a recognition that we’re a rich country, and we can afford a rich, diverse, multicultural public arts and cultural life,” he says.

“I don’t think it’s hard to make the case. What is hard to do is build the electoral coalition or the political momentum to get some reform.”