Closing the Gap from Policy to Practice

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One of the frustrations of life for those who seek change, is the slow pace of reform. Policy reform in arts and culture is no exception. Governments offer promises, but they seem to take forever to arrive, and are often watered down when they do. Why is this so? We have no shortage of policies, Acts, discussion papers and other worthy documents telling us how things could change, but there is always a gap between the policy and what is actually happening.

This article seeks to explain why this gap exists in the field of cultural diversity. It suggests that there are substantial constraints, unlikely to go away in the short term, but there are also encouraging possibilities for implementing change.

To start with, what do these terms cultural diversity and multiculturalism really mean? Both have their origins at government level. From a broad government viewpoint, multiculturalism is a means of managing a diverse population. As a policy it first developed during the Whitlam years in the early seventies. This was the first time an Australian government had identified the need for institutions rather than migrants to change. Previously people migrating to Australia were expected to "assimilate" into what was essentially an Anglo outpost. Governments on both sides of the political fence began to recognise Australia's diverse population. In a country where four out of every ten people are immigrants or children of immigrants a more sophisticated approach for managing the population was required. At a broad level multiculturalism has been a deliberate policy for over twenty years. It has also been successful. It has weathered a number of attacks, and Australia is now internationally recognized as a leader in multiculturalism. John Howard's recent efforts at rebuilding his multicultural credentials show how serious an issue it is for Australian politicians.

The most recent approach to multiculturalism has been to interpret it as managing "cultural diversity". This involves recognising basic principles: the right to individual and collective cultural identity; the right to social justice; and that these can offer efficiencies to the country as a whole.

How do these concepts relate to arts and culture? Basically they provide a policy framework which in theory runs across all government programs. Most governments at federal and state level have adopted them in various forms. In this state they exist in the broad commitment to social justice of the Queensland government. Within Arts Queensland, the state arts department, they also exist as one of several equity concerns (<u>Queensland a State for the Arts</u> [1991] Report of the Arts Committee, Arts Division). However, it doesn't take long to realise there is quite a gap between theory and reality in how things actually operate.

When you look closely at how government policies (and in turn arts and cultural policies) are made, it is not really surprising that such a gap exists. Government policy is not rational, controlled or even logical. It is often complex and turbulent influenced by many different forces, and constrained by structures and past practices. The reality of government decision making is that:

- some groups have privileged access based on positions of power and influence,

- it is often made on an ad hoc basis,

- standard operating procedures can frustrate and dominate,

- it prefers stability, avoids risks, and

- politicians are often more interested in announcing policy than carrying it through.

The implications are clear; powerful interests can maintain their own privileged positions of access and can block access to others. They can also build influential relations with the government of the day. The reality of Australian cultural life is that the majority of resources are controlled by a few, and that European cultural values continue to dominate the landscape.

In 1985 Tim Rowse published a book called Arguing the Arts. In it he argues that a select minority of Australians are able to maintain privileged access to arts and culture. Rowse says:

> ...for many years those upper-middle-class people with a sense of their own cultural responsibility to the rest of society have been able to engage the ear of government.

The majority of our cultural resources in the arts are allocated to traditional European style practice, and few opportunities for other practitioners to develop exist. Rowse argues that a cultural dualism had arisen in which a 'worthy' subsidised public culture is placed above other forms of culture. He sees it as a self-reinforcing system in which resources and rewards are concentrated in the hands of families who have become skilled in their use.

Ten years on, it can be argued that the European cultural values of these "cultural leaders" still dominate our key cultural policies, institutions and thinking. The majority of our cultural resources, particularly at state level, are located within large institutions. In Queensland, some three quarters of the arts 1993/94 budget

was consumed by large statutory authorities such as the Art Gallery, Performing Arts Complex, Museum, etc. These institutions enjoy considerable autonomy and their activities often reflect the values of the influential people who exercise control over them.

This is not to suggest these "cultural leaders" seek to create a purely elite culture. However, they do fashion it in their own image. And with minimal representation of non-English speaking background or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on their boards and at senior management level, the voice that is heard is the one of the traditional Anglo majority. Rowse argues that, in the past, these cultural decision makers had a strong belief that their interests and tastes were universal. However, the concept of cultural democratisation embedded in this approach is very different from that of the later cultural reformers. For their altruism was conditional. They were prepared to share their own cultural values and tastes with a wider Australia, but they were not interested in any other form of cultural distribution or practice. Their desire to make their art more accessible can be seen as seeking a justification for their claim on public resources and control of cultural production. Of course, things have changed in the ten years since Rowse published his book. But by how much?

These institutions are powerful forces in our cultural life. They control most of the resources, and they represent legitimacy and authority in cultural matters throughout the country. They are also very difficult to change and

> as always in considering reform, the worst thing is we can't start from scratch. The weight of institutional development is heavy.(Arguing the Arts)

The point here is that it takes a very determined policy maker to turn around such a well established cultural hierarchy. Many critics have pointed to the devastating impact this cultural landscape has on arts and cultural practices of minority groups. In the most recent and comprehensive analysis of cultural diversity in

the arts, <u>Access to Excellence: a Review of issues affecting artists of non-English speaking backgrounds</u>, editors Castle and Kalantzis argue that powerful and entrenched mechanisms for exclusion operate in Australian culture. Two of the principle ways in which these mechanisms operate is through the uses of 'cultural values' and of 'language'. Cultural values are embodied in a particular concept of 'excellence' which elevates and legitimises established culture and excludes and devalues other cultural activities. Castles and Kalantzis state

> excellence is the universal canon... excellent art touches upon a timeless, transcendent aesthetic.

This has substantial cultural policy implications because government funding is largely determined on the basis of excellence. Experts interpret, define, and decide what is excellent, and thus worthy of support.

Castles and Kalantzis contend "peer assessment and assessment of patrons in the name of excellence keeps art within the cultural norms of those peers and the patrons". They argue this approach defines excellence from a western high cultural viewpoint which effectively discriminates against folk based culture, community art, ethnic art, and co-operatively produced cultural practices.

Language too has a powerful capacity to exclude and to discriminate. Terms such as 'excellence' and 'professionalism' serve to define from a central cultural viewpoint. Those outside this terrain are grouped into stereotypical categories termed 'migrant', 'ethnic', or 'folkloric' which demean as well as marginalise. Castles and Kalantzis give the example of the Latvian writer who in Australia is categorised as a writer of 'stories of immigrant experience', whereas in Latvia this writer is part of the mainstream.

The capacity for language to exclude is pervasive, and over time terms such as multiculturalism, coined to describe policies based on new philosophies, are often changed in use. Multiculturalism comes to mean the minority cultures, which is the opposite of its

stated purpose which is to fully describe the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. The term has become marginalised, thus requiring a new term (currently cultural diversity), to recreate the intended meaning.

These mechanisms are generally not the result of planned cultural conspiracies by hostile elites, or of outright racism. Effectively, those within the established domain have access to resources and recognition, have built positions of influence which perpetuate the domain. Those who fall outside, are denied access, have reduced capacities to practice and develop skills and become demoralised, leading to reduced cultural output.

So, what possibilities for change exist? One way is to change the face of the players, seeking a greater diversity on the Boards of the large cultural organisations. This process is well underway on the committees directly controlled by Arts Queensland, but much slower on the statutory authorities. At the end of June 1994, three of the six statutory authorities had Aboriginal board members. None had members of non-English speaking background. Concrete strategies, encouraging the major organisations to undertake reform, are another way forward. This is foreshadowed in the discussion paper on cultural diversity <u>Your Cultural Identity</u>, recently released by Arts Queensland.

Activities outside these major institutions are the area where greatest reform is taking place. Although it represents only a fifth of the total budget, the arts grants program supports most of the innovation and development in the field of cultural diversity in Queensland. There have been major achievements over recent years. At a policy level Arts Queensland has - to varying degrees - implemented three of the four recommendations on multicultural arts made by the Arts Committee (<u>Queensland a State for the Arts</u>) and recently released the discussion paper <u>Your Cultural Identity</u>. At a practical level organisations such as Brisbane Ethnic Music and Arts Centre have received increased state support. Other arts organisations are also reflecting cultural diversity in their programs of

activity, particularly those working at a community level. And greater levels of funding are slowly finding their way to artists of non-English speaking background and to ethnic cultural organisations.

Much of the potential for cultural diversity however, lies in what is currently not happening. This thesis, extensively covered in Access to Excellence, suggests that much of Australian culture is behind the times; and that an isolated and derivative dominant culture is incompatible with the social, cultural, geographic, economic and political realities of Australia in the nineties. It also suggests that Australia is not utilising its available cultural resources effectively.

Castles and Kalantzis suggest that cultural diversity offers Australia a competitive edge, through being a world leader in multiculturalism. They say:

> in our multicultural policies, in our diverse cultural practices, Australia leads the world. This is something we should be selling to the world.(Access to Excellence)

They sketch out a vision for an Australian cultural life that is inclusive, heterogeneous and outward looking. It is a vision they argue has a sound creative, cultural and strategic base. As a western democratic nation, geographically located in the Asia/Pacific region, with supportive legislative frameworks, a growing body of articulate advocates, and creative exponents, there is real potential for cultural gains. Just as Australian art and culture in the seventies and eighties was internationally attractive for its exuberance (attributable to our youth) and use of space (drawing on our vast landscape), so in the nineties it may well be that our vigour and dynamism will be attributed to our diversity.

Advocates for cultural diversity have developed considerable strategic and policy expertise over recent years and now demand a greater stake in the nation's cultural affairs. The gains have resulted from hard work by activists who, in partnership with supportive bureaucrats, have sought to implement the Commonwealth's principles of Access and Participation. Favourable climates for these reforms, provided by governments with social justice agendas, have aided these endeavours. Up until the early 1990s this was really the extent of the gains. Access was opened up, with increased financial assistance to artists, communities and organisations of non-English speaking background, and increased representation on government decision making bodies. However established culture still largely did not reflect Australia's cultural diversity.

More recently there has been a further, potentially fundamental, shift. From the cultural diversity viewpoint this means a fundamental reshaping of Australian culture, and a corresponding reworking of our cultural institutions. The potential for this shift has been identified. However, there is still a long way to travel before we close the gap.