

Art, Government and War - Lessons From the Past

by [Dr. Lisanne Gibson](#)

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Esteemed cultural academic Dr. Lisanne Gibson stops to consider the relationship between art, war and the politics of funding trends. In looking back, she suggests a pathway to looking forward.

Arts Hub Australia's announcement that in this week before ANZAC day it would be focusing on art and war made me pause to consider some of the instructive and disturbing differences between the relative unimportance in which our current government considers its responsibilities in relation to arts and culture and the origination of State arts funding which came precisely at the time and indeed was in part because of involvement in war.

It was the experiences of WWI, which initiated the government, funded cultural programs of WWII in the UK and which in turn established the importance of government cultural funding in the post-war reconstruction contexts of Australia and the UK. Above all this government and culture partnership was articulated in the name of the achievement of a strong democracy.

To governments of the 1930s and 40s, in the context of recovery from the Great Depression, WWI and WWII, the State came to be understood as responsible for funding cultural programs which were accessible to a broadly based public - this expectation of government was explained in terms of 'what we are fighting for'. The BBC was formed in 1922 and the BFI in 1933.

In 1939, at the very beginning of WWII the British government through its Board of Education established a body called the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). The Council's terms of reference were the 'preservation in wartime of the highest standards in the arts of music, drama and painting; b) The widespread provision of opportunities for hearing good music and the enjoyment of the arts generally for people, who, on account of wartime conditions, have been cut off from these things; c) The encouragement of music-making and play-acting by the people themselves; d) Through the above activities, the rendering of indirect assistance to professional singers and players who may be suffering from a wartime lack of demand for their work' (see Gibson 1999). CEMA organised concerts in factories, mines, air-raid shelters, town halls, hostels, convalescent homes; opera singers were sent down mines to serenade miners as they worked, actors were sent to working men's clubs to give rousing renditions of that unsurpassed call to arms, the St. Crispin's Day speech from Shakespeare's Henry the Fifth (indeed forty years later my own grandfather, an uneducated coalminer, could still recite this speech by heart).

As well as the obvious propaganda functions of CEMA, it also supported amateur cultural activities and arts education in which people could participate without being beaten over the head with their 'Britishness'. CEMA's founders believed that 'enjoyment of the arts is closely linked with their practice', that ordinary people should experience art as practitioners, not as consumers. As a CEMA Council member, Reginald Jacques, put it in 1945 'Art is, or should be, the possession of everyman. I believe that Art can bind together peoples and nations in an all-embracing effectiveness which is equalled by no other force'. The economist Maynard Keynes became Chair of CEMA in 1942 and in 1945 at the end of WWII CEMA was turned into the Arts Council heralding the beginning of national arts funding through a 'arm's length' government funding body. This basic model has informed many country's cultural policies ever since (e.g. Australia, Canada and New Zealand).

In Australia the appeal to the 'plain Australian' was the primary rhetorical frame for advocacy of government support for the arts during WWII and the post-war reconstruction efforts. As for the British CEMA, advocacy of State art funding in Australia was not simply about 'the fine arts' but was

argued to be directly relevant to the everyday life of the 'plain Australian' by effecting the choices in furniture, clothes, and other consumables through which they chose to assert their individuality. Australian CEMA was established in 1943 on the model of the British CEMA. Its purpose was 'to bring art, in all its forms, to the people, to encourage them, not only to cultivate an appreciation of all that is beautiful in music, painting, sculpture, drama, ballet, and so forth, but also to express themselves in some one or other of the arts and crafts ... CEMA is based on the belief that art, in the widest sense of the word, is not a luxury for the few, but a necessity for all, in a community which aims to develop to the full the faculties of its citizens and so enable them to make the best of life' (Arts Council of Australia, NSW Division, 1947).

Between 1943 and 1945 CEMA toured cultural programs of various kinds to factories, offices and service camps particularly in regional Australia. Unlike British CEMA, the Australian body, which in 1945 became the Arts Council of Australia (it retains this title today), was not supported by the State. However, the appeal to the 'plain Australian' and the belief that access to culture was a basic right of citizenship emerged in Australia at this time and can be traced in other cultural programs of the time including in the policies of the Art Galleries of Victoria and New South Wales.

There is a sharp difference between this 1940s moment of support for culture in the midst of war and the almost absolute erasure of the importance of the public interest in 'culture' in our current Government's rhetoric and policy in this dawn of a new global conflict. Of primary relevance for the Howard government is not the support of a citizens' 'cultural rights' (as Donald Horne was to describe it in the 1980s) to a diversity of cultural experience, but the economic benefit to be gleaned from 'creative products'.

This cherry picking logic will not produce and is not designed to produce cultural diversity, but to facilitate and support the more directly commercial parts of the cultural production 'value chain' at the expense of other cultural products (unless these are the elitist forms of performance art which this government deems to have national significance). However, this policy logic judged even within its own economic terms will not result in the innovative product contemporary policy is so committed to, as we know the spheres of cultural production exist as a series of ecological relationships where government funded, self funded and commercially funded cultural product and activity are not mutually exclusive. But of most concern is the extent to which economic rationalities have overtaken the central placing of the public interest in our national cultural policies.

For the policy makers, intellectuals and citizens of the 1940s broad access to education and cultural product was the very basis of a strong democracy. For them the individualist ethos and the primacy of economic rationalism had resulted in the disaster of the Depression and had laid the foundations for the rise of Fascism. In our contemporary internal and external policy contexts where increasingly the lines are more heavily drawn between groupings of people on the basis of race or economic prosperity, whether these are effects of immigration or education policy for instance, now is the time to draw on lessons from the past.

In an article which John Howard should read as he flies to America to sign off on the Free Trade Agreement which sells out the future possibilities for Australia's control of its national culture, Arthur Phillips argued in 1946 that the State must be a strong supporter of culture 'if our national life is not to wither'. The challenge in our contemporary Australian context is to develop cultural programs, which re-emphasise the central function of culture as the sphere through which we assert our differences but to do so in ways which are convivial. While policies for culture continue to be dominated by the bottom dollar the cultural, social and political lines drawn around diversity and difference will continue to grow.

See L. Gibson, *Art and Citizenship- Governmental Intersections* (1999, PhD thesis, Griffith

University, Australia); L. Gibson, *The Uses of Art: Constructing Australian Identities* (2002, University of Queensland Press).

Dr. Lisanne Gibson

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