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Arts move draws howl of protest

Raymond Gill
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FORMER state arts ministers have launched an unprecedented protest against the highly controversial merger of the Victorian College of the Arts with Melbourne University.

Every living former ALP and Liberal arts minister has written to the university's vice-chancellor, Glyn Davis, arguing the merger threatens the VCA's role in the arts community and seeking a meeting with him to voice their concerns.

Former premier and arts minister Jeff Kennett last night said the VCA was "like an orchid that under pressure can produce a wonderful bloom".

Mr Kennett said one reason he regretted losing the 1999 election was that his program for the next four years included a system to secure financial independence for the VCA.

"You can't have a modern city without a thriving creative life at its centre. If the State Government saw fit to spend \$65 million to get the World Swimming Championships for a one-off event for Melbourne then surely it could give the VCA a secure life for the future."

The proposed changes to the VCA at Melbourne University were very different to what was first proposed by the merger, Mr Kennett said.

Under the merger the current six specialist training schools at the VCA would be restructured into three under the so-called Melbourne Model and would see students from 2011 do a three-year degree in fine arts or music and specialise in a single artistic discipline when at postgraduate level.

Race Mathews, who was arts minister during the Cain Labor government from 1982 to 1987, confirmed that the group of former ministers had written to Professor Davis on August 14 requesting the meeting.

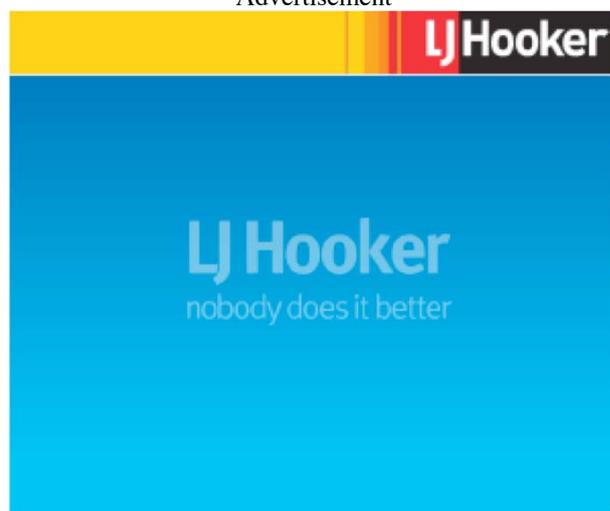
"The VCA is truly one of the jewels in the crown of the arts in Victoria and to have it in any way compromised would be a tragedy for the arts in this state and nationally," he said.

The unprecedented display of bipartisanship was from Mr Mathews, Mr Kennett, his former parliamentary secretary for the arts Lorraine Elliott, Norman Lacy and Haddon Storey, together with former ALP arts ministers Mary Delahunty, Robert Fordham, Jim Kennan, Andrew McCutcheon, Evan Walker and Ian Cathie.

"The VCA has developed a unique approach to arts education and training in Victoria and it's one that is widely admired and envied throughout the country," Mr Mathews said.

"(It) should be a specialist training course with a hands-on emphasis and that doesn't necessarily exist within the university context."

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The VCA has to find \$6 million a year to pay the university rent. It will also lose its \$5 million subsidy from 2011 and is carrying a \$1.5 million debt.

Melbourne University spokeswoman Christina Buckridge confirmed Professor Davis would meet a deputation of the ministers later this week to discuss their concerns but said it was part of a "series of meetings with interested parties".

The former politicians' protest follows last week's resignation of three members of advisory committees overseeing the merger. They included a former president of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Noel Turnbull, chairwoman of Tourism Victoria Janine Kirk and Lynne Landy, wife of former Victorian governor John Landy.

Last week actor Geoffrey Rush protested with VCA students against the merger. "I always advise you must train, train, train: not study - train," he told a rally in the city.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/arts-move-draws-howl-of-protest-20090825-ey4j.html>