

CANVAS

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An independent review can provide governments with the evidence and rationale for supporting the VCA as a national college of the arts.

THE debate about the Victorian College of the Arts' future is not just about the University of Melbourne and Victoria _ it is about whether the VCA is to be a national, world-class multi-disciplinary arts training college or not.

The VCA debate needs to shift from a focus on cost cuts to how to achieve that national vision, and why it is essential to Victorian life, culture and its arts industries.

The barrier to making the VCA into such an Australian college of the arts is obvious _ the VCA has been denied for far too long equivalent status and equivalent Commonwealth financial support to the National Institute of Dramatic Art and the Australian Film Television and Radio School.

All the people who are campaigning to save the VCA _ including the 11 former arts ministers who jointly signed a letter calling on the university to protect the VCA _ do not deny that the VCA, like any institution, needs to evolve. What they are concerned about is that the VCA has been the platform on which much of the creativity and innovation that characterises the arts in Victoria has been built. Visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, actors, dancers, puppeteers and production and administration staff of national and international renown have owed their careers to the distinctive combination of inter-disciplinary and studio-based learning that is the unique and indispensable cornerstone of the college's approach.

Successive Victorian governments have made significant investment in magnificent arts infrastructure _ the NGV, the Arts Centre, the museum, the Melbourne Recital Centre _ and support a wide range of festivals and arts companies.

They recognised that this investment is just one part of what makes Victorian life, culture and arts industries remarkable. Yet they also recognised that the

infrastructure would be under-used, and the arts groups unsustainable, without the constant renewal which comes with each generation of aspiring artists.

The one-off coming together of the ministers who had responsibility for that arts policy to defend the VCA has been the finest public manifestation of this bipartisan support for the arts since former Labor premier John Cain stood aside for former Liberal premier Dick Hamer to open the Victorian Arts Centre.

And, as a former chief of staff to a Liberal minister commented to me over the weekend, "Dick Hamer would turn in his grave if he knew what was being done to the VCA."

So what is to be done? How can we protect the VCA and enhance its capacity to enrich Victorian and national life?

Arising from the meeting of representatives of the former ministers with the university, it was my understanding that, as sought, there was agreement to the effect that a fully independent, transparent and "inclusive of independent and civic stakeholders" review would be undertaken of the VCA's curriculum and pedagogy, together with other matters, including its finances and funding requirements.

It would be open for the longest-serving and most recently retired former minister, Mary Delahunty, to accept appointment to the supervisory body for the review.

We sought assurance that no reduction of studio training, practice or teaching would occur in advance of the review's having been completed.

Given that the university's media statement omitted specific reference to these undertakings, it's important that their acceptance by the university should now be confirmed.

Even more important is the role an independent review can play in providing Commonwealth and state governments with the evidence and rationale for supporting the VCA as a national college of the arts.

A review can also resolve other questions, including whether the arts and those wanting to practise them will be well served by greater emphasis on academic study, at the expense of Geoffrey Rush's "training, training, training". And how well served would potential arts practitioners be by university entry requirements better suited to academic disciplines?

Early and positive responses to the former ministers' initiative have included the acknowledgement, by federal Education Minister Julia Gillard, of the importance

of the VCA, and her agreement to be available for consultation about its retention with the university and the Victorian Government.

The university and the Victorian Minister for the Arts should immediately and urgently take the federal minister at her word, accept her offer of a meeting and work with VCA stakeholders to develop a long-term solution.

What is at issue is whether Victoria is to have just another faculty of visual and performing arts, similar to those in innumerable tertiary institutions, or be the home of an outstanding national arts training institution that proudly carries and fully merits the title Australian College of the Arts.

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