

VCA: saviour arrives, arraigned in pre-election glory

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For twenty years, Victorian state arts advocates have prayed for a Commonwealth angel to bring manna to the Victorian College of the Arts. At last, the whole mess is about to be solved - or so we think, and depending on the election.

The Federal and State governments have crafted a deal, assuming of course that the Gillard Government is returned on August 22nd. The Brumby government will deploy \$2m to seed fund a VCA Trust. It will spend \$1m on equipment and "renewal".

\$420,000 of that will be spent to "refit the Southbank film and sound studios", according to the announcement. Along with some smaller refurbishments, \$520,000 will be used to upgrade the dance studio floor.

The \$2m will be matched by the Federal Government, giving the new foundation a \$4m warchest. Melbourne University, at least, hopes this will inspire private donors, creating a new face in the private family munificence dance. According to the State government, it will run like the NIDA Trust.

The real muscle will come from the Federal government, which will provide \$5.1m/year from 2012.

According to Simon Troeth, speaking on behalf of the Victorian State Liberal Party, this is clearly an election stunt. "I remain cynical about this," he said, "because they have neglected it for so long and only committed themselves when they are under threat from the Greens in the seat of Melbourne."

Indeed, the Labor Party has carefully linked the announcement to Cath Bowtell, its candidate for the seat, who turns up in The Age photograph between the steel wheels of a sculpture outside the VCA. The nasty spikes on the hub caps speak of the political tensions.

However, the State ALP contains a sting in the tail which could get very messy - "the condition that the University of Melbourne will maintain VCA's current funding, including its \$6 million cross-subsidy, beyond 2011."

Melbourne University has already said that the income of the

existing VCAM is \$30m/year, and its costs are \$38m. The average cost per place is \$30,000, which includes \$13,000 in staff wages and \$17,000 "non-staff and property costs." Meanwhile, the "overnment and student contribution for each Commonwealth-supported student place in the visual and performing arts is \$15,972." The government puts in around \$10,000, and each student contributes about \$5000.

In its document responding to the enquiry, Melbourne University has agreed to continue the subsidy, for a fixed term while VCA should "explore new and innovative mechanisms for enhancing the financial position of the two divisions and centrally supported programs."

Melbourne University reckons the "new and innovative financing strategies" could include increasing the number of international students, offering more fee-paying graduate courses, creating more short course programs, increasing student numbers where possible, and creating courses for students elsewhere in the University working under the Melbourne Model.

While the staff and students have agitated against the "reforms" for many reasons, the need to increase the staff student ratio, reduce the teaching load and manage the impact of fee-paying international students are pretty central.

Has this problem disappeared?

According to the University, "The University's five-year agreement to make up a shortfall in Commonwealth funding of more than \$5 million annually ceases at the end of 2011, but on the issue of whether the University would commit to extending the subsidy, Professor Davis said it had been significantly larger than required by the Commonwealth and would continue beyond 2011."

That somewhat convoluted paragraph suggests that the federal money will be fed into the machine, and the Melbourne Uni subsidy will cover the shortfall. Meaning the federal government will be paying the rent and administration costs - which it would do on some level if the VCA was entirely separate anyway.

Either way, the situation is confusing. Professor Sue Baker, the newish Director of the VCA, was unable to clarify the situation on the phone. As she said, "It is going t mean a new negotiated budget model for us. Bear in mind, this Federal money doesn't come until 2012, and it was to replace the money that was lost in 2005, so it is a the continuation of a funding agreement from some years ago."

"But higher education is now in a very different funding environment. That fact has been recognised - we are half way there, and that is excellent really. It gives us an opportunity to grow our offerings which we have been wanting to do for a while."

Pressed on the contradiction between the two views, she pointed that this is the beginning of a period of negotiating. The various parties will horse trade a solution, and these lines represent the starting point.

While the Federal Liberal Party has not made any statement on its response, Baker did point out that the Foundation is safe, whatever the election result. The first \$2m is state money.

Meanwhile, the State Liberal Party is committed, as per an open letter from Ted Baillieu, to "ensure the shortfall of up to \$6 million currently preventing the VCA from fulfilling its purpose is restored."

The State Labor government has also stated that "the Victorian Government would:

- Continue working with the VCA as part of their Curriculum Review to ascertain whether expanding to offer a new series of VET (TAFE) courses could contribute to future sustainability while providing pathways to degree courses (like the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts);
- Provide leadership around investigating and securing industry partnerships for courses such as music theatre and puppetry; and
- Continue working with the University of Melbourne to further develop VCA facilities as part of the development of Melbourne's world leading Southbank Cultural Precinct.

That TAFE announcement agrees with the Melbourne Uni short course theory, and sets up a competitor to AFTRS in Victoria.

It creates an intriguing possibility that VCA could also get into the tertiary education market for writers, in competition with RMIT. In that case, both would have to wrestle with the fee structure, which is now believed to be creating a major disincentive to students at RMIT.

"Providing leadership" over the removal of the music theatre and puppetry program is a step in the right direction - but could go further.

Said Professor Baker, "What we can't assume is that the VCA is going to be the same VCA. This is actually an opportunity to reinvent ourselves - but we will do it, and it won't be done for us."

"It gives us a bit of clear air to get on with some exciting things. I am a relentless optimist, and I have a sticker which says so on my door."

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