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Opinion

Labor leaves arts sector crying poor

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Joy at a change of government has turned to disillusionment at a perceived lack of support from the Rudd cabinet

LEADING figures in the arts rejoiced that their tribe had been returned to power when the Rudd government was elected in 2007.

Prominent arts festival director Brett Sheehy, for example, told The Australian he had decided to remain in the country and take the job directing the Melbourne International Arts Festival rather than seek opportunities overseas because the election of the Australian Labor Party came with the promise of social reform and a rejuvenated arts sector.

"I was getting fed up with this phrase 'aspirational change' and I thought it was a really exciting time to stay in Australia," he says.

Sheehy was not alone. Arts figures tend to be simpatico with the ALP, but more than that they recall the Keating and Whitlam Labor eras as flourishing times for the arts in Australia. At the Helpmann Awards in 2007, then opposition arts spokesman Peter Garrett received a rock-star welcome merely by walking on stage to present an award. Likewise, despite the Coalition being in government then, Paul Keating was invited to present an award and brought down the house when he declared with a flourish the Visigoths were in the cathedral.

What a difference 2 1/2 years can make. Festival directors in plum roles such as Sheehy are in clover because the high Australian dollar is making foreign acts cheaper to import. It also helps that funding for their high-profile events is guaranteed by state governments locked in an ever-escalating battle of interstate one-upmanship.

Instead, it is the arts practitioners and administrators who deal with the federal government, many of them traditional Labor-voting arts luvvies, who have become disillusioned with the Rudd government and its chief arts apparatchik, Garrett. Kevin Rudd has not attended a single arts event during his prime ministership, despite his office being deluged with invitations. Treasurer Wayne Swan and Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner are similarly

disengaged from the sector.

Their term has not featured any big structural arts reforms or been distinguished by any significant ideological changes.

Garrett's former career as Midnight Oil's frontman recommended him well as an arts minister but the general manager of one big drama company now argues his passion for pop music and politics has not necessarily translated into a passion for, and understanding of, broader art forms.

In fact, some argue his experience in the music industry, where success can generate real wealth, makes him unsympathetic to the subsidised arts.

A chapter from his 1987 manifesto *Political Blues* tends to indicate as much. He argues for subsidising emerging bands, which could pay back such subsidy in the event they became successful. "And it wouldn't be the end of the world if Dame Joan Sutherland and Opera Australia took a cut in pay, would it? At least rock music is relevant to the times and, to a certain extent, characteristic of this country. The same cannot be said for other art forms, which are heavily supported by taxpayers' money," Garrett wrote.

With the federal government preparing for the toughest budget in 15 years there is deep concern the sector faces cuts. At the very least, various requests for assistance seem unlikely to be granted.

Concern at the prospect of cuts is exacerbated by general disgruntlement that despite the government's stimulus spending of \$70 billion in the past two years, the Arts Minister managed to wrangle few bonuses for the arts.

The last budget included a series of one-off grants and pilot schemes, but the absence of any grand vision was glaring.

Garrett rejects this notion and says his government's arts legacy is fourfold.

"It's the maintenance and continuation of funding, in particular by providing additional support for indigenous creativity, visual art and music," he says. "It's the inclusion [of arts] in the national curriculum. It's the resale royalty scheme, now passed," for which the minister says a collection agency has been appointed, although not announced.

It is also programs such as the Artists in Residence scheme under which \$5.5 million, to be spent across four years, will fund artists to work within schools.

When the ALP was elected its supporters in the arts did not envisage that by the end of its first term the "maintenance and continuation of funding" of the previous Coalition government would be trumpeted as a legacy.

The resale royalty scheme, which will see a percentage of sales returned to visual artists and their estates, was conceived during the Coalition's term and tends to have more detractors than supporters.

There is no guarantee arts will be included in the national curriculum; it must still be approved. And, for example, in Victoria the Artists in Residence program this year funded just three additional schools to host an artist for a couple of terms.

Garrett says his government has increased arts funding overall by \$65.4m. The 2008 budget cut money for the Regional Arts Fund from \$16.4m across four years to \$11m, down 28 per cent.

The record of Coalition arts spokesman Steven Ciobo is not much better. The Coalition's website does not even list the arts as a searchable topic in its news releases and the Gold Coast-based Ciobo has made no memorable statements on the portfolio since he replaced another Queenslander, George Brandis, in 2007.

Ciobo now says, however, that his constituents in the arts are deeply worried about financial cuts. "Peter Garrett has demonstrated he is a weak link in the government" because of the bungled insulation scheme he oversaw. So, Ciobo

argues, "How can anyone expect him to be a strong advocate for the arts?"

Labor points to the fact Garrett is in cabinet to underline its arts credentials. It's true the Howard government never had an arts minister in cabinet, but the position is diminished if the arts sector doesn't have the support of the Finance Minister, Treasurer and PM. Australian Major Performing Arts Group executive director Sue Donnelly says invitations sent to the Prime Minister's office from the companies she represents, including the Australian Ballet, Sydney Theatre Company and Opera Australia, are always declined.

"He's an incredibly busy man and he's got so many demands on his time but [accepting an invitation would be] a gesture to demonstrate the arts . . . are important in our country," Donnelly says.

In fact, Rudd may be out of step with an arts-loving nation. Last month the Australia Council for the Arts released figures that revealed 93 per cent of Australians engage regularly with the arts.

At an arts industry breakfast last month, the chairwoman of Sydney's Company B Belvoir theatre, Louise Herron, bemoaned the fact her troupe has not been able to implement a vital pay restructure despite having received a grant from the NSW government to do so.

Belvoir's public funding comes equally from the state and federal governments, so it needs to match the \$320,000 across five years it has received from the NSW government. It needs to restructure its parity salary scheme that now has all staff, including its general manager, earning \$50,000 a year.

The artistic director earns \$75,000 on the assumption he undertakes substantial overtime in the course of his job.

Herron's frustrated revelation before an audience of more than 100 arts professionals was greeted with noises of familiarity. It is well known that last year's review of the major performing arts companies has received no response since it was delivered in October to the state and federal arts ministers conference.

"We're still waiting to find out what will happen," Donnelly says. "We haven't been given anything concrete, one can only assume they didn't like the recommendations so they decided to look at it again. If they've got a problem with the funding model we're happy to work with them. The frustration from the companies' point of view is there's no response," she says.

Company B is one of those companies but its general manager, Brenna Hobson, begs to differ. She says the pay restructure process is on track with the federal government; the state money came through earlier than expected and the target date for the pay rearrangement is next year.

Garrett is familiar with the concerns articulated by performing arts companies, but the bigger financial picture indicates they will not get any relief this year.

Melbourne Theatre Company general manager Ann Tonks says it's not just the bigger companies that are frustrated with the federal government; all levels of the arts are challenged.

"I'm not seeing anything that's particularly proactive," Tonks says of the federal government. Relations between Garrett and the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts would appear to be strained after the insulation bungle, and sources say this has flowed through to the arts.

The Australia Council has argued that the efficiency dividend should not be applied to its program funding. It can work with cuts to its administration, which accounts for 9.5 per cent of its annual stipend, but cuts to program funding are hard for small to mid-tier companies. The dividend does not affect the big companies.

Again the minister is sympathetic, but this is another ask that is likely to fall on deaf ears this year.

Sheehy praises the Rudd government's economic management through the financial crisis and notes the record box

office and audiences for last year's arts festival in Melbourne. He says they were achieved because the economy is strong. Having said that, in 2007 he had not envisaged that as this government neared the end of its term, his greatest praise would be for its fiscal management.

The Australia Council's survey on how Australians engage with the arts, released this year, broadly speaking has been cynically interpreted. The figures crunched for the arts funding agency gave Garrett the chance to crow that the population is deeply engaged with the arts. They also bolstered the importance of the council, in the throes of its triennial review.

Australia Council chief executive Kathy Keele has said she hoped the survey would help people connect the arts in their lives with culture and community. "We can have this conversation more openly, it's no longer considered elitist," she says.

A problem for the sector is that the previous pro-arts Labor governments of Keating and Gough Whitlam are also remembered for their big spending. As such the government's economic hard men see few votes in the arts. "There are votes there but almost unconsciously," Keele says.

In this climate, that may not be enough.

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