

**Regional Arts NSW Annual Congress Dinner**  
**Bangara Dance Theatre Mezzanine, Wharf 4**  
**Friday 30 April 2004**

**Address by Mr Roger Wilkins,**  
**Director-General, The Cabinet Office & NSW Ministry for the Arts**

*Meg Larkin, Chair, Regional Arts NSW,*  
*Cr. John Wearne, Chair, Arts North West,*  
*Regional Arts Development Officers, ladies and gentlemen*

**WHEN** the Carr Government was elected in 1995, it undertook to deliver the most comprehensive change to cultural policy and funding that New South Wales has ever seen. It undertook to place a new emphasis on regional and rural New South Wales, responding to the needs of small rural communities as well as those of larger regional centers.

This change in Government support for regional arts development could not have occurred without the leadership provided by the State's network of regional arts board, the RADO officers and Regional Arts NSW, and the co-operation of the State's cultural institutions and other key agencies.

Since the signing of the First Cultural Accord in 1997 there has been an unprecedented growth in local government and community interest in new galleries, cinemas, museums, theatres, festivals and cultural activities in general.

Although the Government is proud of its achievements in the arts, it will continue to review and evaluate the role of the arts in regional development.

It is significant that we have appointed economist Professor David Throsby as chair to the NSW Arts Advisory Council. It shows our intent to engage seriously with how the arts and the regional economy interconnect.

In his book *Economics and Culture* Professor Throsby writes of the importance of the arts in the economic life of the community as a catalyst for regeneration. This may happen in a number of ways.

A specific cultural facility, event or program may itself be a significant cultural symbol or attraction. Of the overseas visitors spending time in New South Wales, 60% visit cultural facilities and more than 20% attend special events and festivals. Almost 30% of overseas visitors to New South Wales visit museums and art galleries and almost 40% visit history and heritage sites. For example, the Byron

Bay Community Centre, the Northern Rivers Writers Festival and the Tweed Shire *City of the Arts*' program.

A cultural centre or precinct may act as a focus for development in a local area. Think of the civic and cultural centres in Wagga Wagga, Narrabri, Gunnedah and the unique community cultural centre in Gulargambone.

The cultural industries, the performing arts, music, touring and regional cinema, may contribute to a community's economy. Increasingly areas of country New South Wales are attracting highly skilled professional arts workers and practitioners. The country is where many artists go *to do their own thing*. The Illawarra, the Blue Mountains, North Eastern NSW, and numerous towns and villages now have cultural industries that impact on the local economy.

*Government needs to holistically assess the role of culture in country NSW.*

Culture may have a more wide-ranging and integrated role in regional development through fostering of community identity, creativity, cohesion and vitality through the cultural characteristics that define a regional centre and its inhabitants. Think of the role of cultural tourism and local artists in sustaining the economy of Broken Hill.

I believe a cultural development strategy should run parallel with other economic development strategies for a given country area and is central to increasing the liveability and vibrancy of the region.

But apart from developing arts industry itself, the wider economic ramifications of culture are well known. They include direct revenue impacts through spending, then second round spending effects of related businesses such as restaurants and transport, and tourism generally. Employment growth may also be significant.

Culture may also have even wider economic implications for regional revitalisation through diversification of the local economic base. There may be broader economic enhancements like greater social cohesion, civic pride, lower crime rates, and increased economic dynamism. These factors will improve the profile or image of the region for capital investment and the establishment of new businesses.

We need to acknowledge the importance of the arts in building cultural capital.

Professor Throsby describes how the notion of cultural capital embodies both the ‘tangible’ (like buildings, precincts or artefacts) and more ‘intangible’ intellectual capital. Like natural capital, our cultural capital is like a fragile ecosystem, and needs a full spectrum of diverse types of cultural activity to survive.

So far I have spoken mainly about the outcomes of arts and cultural development activity in economic terms. But valuing and supporting art is not just about its utilitarian value. What of the aesthetic, historical, social and symbolic value of arts and cultural activity. What value do we place on the arts?

Research commissioned by the Australia Council in 2000 and 2001 showed that the arts are immensely important to Australians:

- 83 per cent of Australians attend some form of cultural activity – which is twice the number who attend a sporting activity;
- 88 per cent of Australians place some value on having a creative skill – compared with 68 per cent for sporting skill;
- 66 per cent of people agree the arts are important for their inner self;
- 85 per cent of people think the arts should be a part of the education of every Australian kid

As an example, in recognition of the importance of promoting the value of the arts in schools, the Government is launching an exciting new arts and education strategy which has been developed between the Ministry for the Arts and the Department of Education and Training. There is a financial commitment of \$1.9m over 4 years.

The strategy will provide students and teachers from many remote country areas of the state, access to high quality theatre, dance, music and visual arts experiences, artist in residence programs and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Such an initiative is an investment in the future well being on all levels, an increase in our cultural capital.

The strategic priorities for arts development by the New South Wales Government are leadership, education, innovation and creativity and strengthening the arts and cultural environment. These are similar to priorities that creative businesses also value.

The role of the arts in knowledge production is being increasingly recognised. Partnerships between scientists and artists are being fostered; we are witnessing the use of the arts in creatively making decisions which affect health, housing, environment, transport and urban development.

The Government will shortly be launching the Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government.

Local councils are among the largest and most generous contributors to the State's cultural life. We rely on them for local libraries, art galleries and many regional museums and other services.

I believe that the delivery of cultural services by councils can be strengthened by integrating cultural strategies more closely with council's broader priorities and objectives.

In this way, cultural amenities can be seen, not as something remote or apart from everyday life, but fundamental to people's needs and the business of local government.

The Guidelines have been developed by the NSW Ministry for the Arts and the NSW Department of Local Government after consultation with local government representatives and key agencies. The introduction and implementation of the cultural planning guidelines will largely dependent on a high level of co-operation from State and Local Government.

The Regional Arts Boards and RADOs could have a significant role to play in the introduction of the guidelines. I would like to suggest that when expressions of interest are called to assist the Ministry for the Arts and the Department of Local Government with the introduction of the guidelines that Regional Arts NSW, in consultation with the regional arts boards, consider making a submission.

As I have travelled around the State, I have been impressed with the work of the Regional Arts Boards and the RADOs with local government; the capacity of the boards and the officers to collaborate with numerous community and cultural groups, to link them to local government, and most importantly, to local government support.

Few arts organisations survive for fifty or more years. It will only be a few more years before Regional Arts NSW, and its predecessor the Arts Council of NSW, celebrates its sixtieth anniversary in 2006. The arts council movement is one of the success stories of the arts. Tonight's dinner and the inaugural conference is timely.

I congratulate all concerned and wish you the all the best for the success of your endeavours. ■