



Groundswell

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Keynote address: The arts, the regions and the economy

by Donald Horne

Paper delivered at 9:30am Saturday 12 October at the plenary session Undercurrents – Social Politics + Regional Culture.

If I were introducing myself to you I'd introduce myself as I was at the age of eleven, in 1933 – Don Horne, just completed his six years at the Muswellbrook District School and next year off to Maitland Boys High. Then I'd point out that the word 'regional' didn't exist back then – all we were was a country town – and the phrase 'the arts', so far as we were concerned, also didn't exist – apart from an occasional art lesson at school, in which we mastered drawing in perspective. There was a School of Arts library which had several hundred light romantic novels, detective stories and adventure stories and annually we had a concert of the pupils of Miss Alma Doeppel who taught elocution, piano and violin. One year a musical comedy was put on into which the window dresser at Campbell's wrote some local allusions. There was no radio but there was a picture show and occasionally a circus or some diversion came to town. We sang songs around the pianola. And that was art.

All this, just as a reminder.

I've been asked to begin by talking about the arts and the political landscape. From my own experience, such as it was, over six years chairing the Australia Council and a year or two after that lobbying with Arts Action Australia, the most useful metaphor to describe the political landscape – so far as the attitudes towards the arts of both ministers and shadow ministers went – would be one of mental and cultural drought. It was a dry landscape on a dark night ...

In fact there has never been a prolonged serious talk about producing a cultural policy for Australia. Under the Keating government there were the beginnings of an attempt, initiated by the Department, to bring out an overall document but it was trashed and replaced by the prime minister and his staff with the mishmash of glitz and technocracy that became *Creative Nation*. And various attempts on the Commonwealth Ministers Council to set up a national, state and regional discussion got hardly anywhere because to push them through would have required a Commonwealth Arts Minister with imagination, talents and enthusiasm for cultural policy and I don't recall anyone meeting those specifications.

Before going on I suppose I should give you my own idea of where a cultural policy might begin. I think it might begin with the declaration that just as we have political and social and economic rights so we might also think of ourselves as having cultural rights. Three cultural rights would do it:

- The right of our citizens to engage with the human cultural heritage
- The right of our citizens to engage with new intellectual and artistic production
- The right of our citizens to engage in their own forms of intellectual and art production.

Having said that, I'm afraid I'll have to take several more minutes to make three comments on it.

The first comment is that you may be thinking: what's all this 'intellectual' and 'cultural'? Aren't we supposed to be talking about *the arts*? Well, what I would hope we're also talking about is the diversity of appeals to the curiosity and the sense of wonder of our fellow citizens. As I see it, the arts, broadly defined, are part of a wider imaginative and creative world that, in the regions, should include what happens in local libraries, local history museums, local heritage societies, local history societies, local community broadcasting, local book groups, local further education services, local cultural tourism, local design, and so on, and also of course local

Indigenous cultural artefacts and activities, contemporary and traditional – a separate category because of their unique cultural base and the unique position of the Aboriginal people.

The second comment is connected with the word ‘engagement’. As you would all recognise, the word ‘engagement’ doesn’t just mean doing something yourself. It also means the acts of imaginative engagement you make with what is presented to you by others. In other words not just saying *Oh I like that* or *No I don’t like that*, but also trying to get something out of it to help you on your way in facing the puzzles of existence. In fact I seem to remember recommending to somebody or other once that governments, big or little, should insist that all publicly funded organisations should be required to state their policy on securing active intellectual engagement in whatever shows they are putting on. Nothing much is gained if a lot of people walk into an art museum without having a few tips about how to look at paintings, for example. More positively: a delightful intellectual revolt has been seen in the form of readers book clubs – the ‘bookies’ – who, unlike the deconstructionists, have returned to the earlier approach of ‘appreciation’, of seeing what you can get out of a book. And there was a great response to the Big Screen project last year that not only toured 23 regions with Australian movies from silent movies to the present to but also sent out with them film makers and actors to discuss them with the audience. I still remember how Dance North, bumping along up there from one bush town to the next, always insisted on entering into a dialogue with their audiences as well as dancing for them. You would each of you have dozens of more examples.

The third comment is that all of this occurs to the background of the wider culture. *Wider culture?* What do I mean by wider culture? In this case I mean the collective habits of thinking and acting that give particular meanings to the existence of individuals, or groups, or the public culture of whole societies. When people react to what they’re looking at or reading or listening to in, say, the arts it is from the perspectives of these habits. And it’s a two-way process. What they look at or read or listen to may affect one or two of their ways of thinking or acting.

Now I’ll get onto two significant economic changes. One is what has been called in the United States ‘the economisation of culture’ – a phrase that gives a feeling of its own aridity. This is a socio-cultural change. Not in itself an economic change but a change in conceptions of the economic and what matters in life: it’s a *fundamentalist* creed – the fundamentalism of the bottom line. Unlike religious fundamentalisms it’s not supported by public stonings or beheadings but its effects can be pretty ruthless. It’s the kind of language that turns our society into *‘the economy’*; our citizens into *‘the consumers’* and our public funds into *‘taxpayers’ money’*. It’s also the kind of language that reduces poems or plays or dances to ‘product’ and that speaks of the need to give art its own brand. (Which to an old Muswellbrook boy evokes the smell of burning cow hide.)

The other relevant economic change is that, in the new post-industrial society, with its emphasis on services, there has been an overturning of both the real economy and the labour force – manufacturing declines, service industries go up and old concepts such as having a career, even concepts such as regular employment are battered. Some people have amazingly interesting jobs.

Others have no jobs at all.

The first of these changes – the economisation of culture – could strangle us with its rubbish. The second can damage old ways, but also perhaps give us new life and new prospects. (Note that I said ‘could’, not ‘will’. We don’t know what’s going to happen.) I won’t talk about the post-industrial society yet but I’ll offer one example. The very expression ‘regional centre’ has only come in as an opportunity because economic change has affected some aspects of life in the country. It’s a kind of regrouping of forces: the vitality of many of the old towns declines – except as dormitories for the regional centres – but regional centres grow stronger. A largish town or a smallish city can now feel big enough and well-equipped enough to consider confidently re-characterising itself and its hinterland and then saying something to the rest of Australia. That seems a problem that has turned into an opportunity

Now ... ‘the economisation of culture’. Consider just two quotations taken at random from the 1990s.

‘The arts industry has to turn its attention away from the supply side of the arts equation to the creation of a higher level of demand from arts consumers’.

‘[By being seen as part of the economy] artists have been promoted to a place in the big picture. Artists have been elevated to the high table of economic policy.’

How is it that people concerned with speaking up for ‘the arts’ and other cultural activities have been reduced to that kind of twaddle?

It comes directly from an attempt to 'economate' Australians' imaginations by pushing the voguish terminology of markets, globalism, salesmanship, the bottom line and so forth into places where they have no place (and it's often done by people who couldn't themselves manage the bottom line in a fish and chips shop).

It's part of a destructive flattening-out of difference often coming from people who are attempting to conceal their own ordinariness with a new, flat language.

For universities and 'the arts' it can mean reducing their values to acronyms and rows of figures (that are probably misleading anyway).

It conceals how *different* 'the arts' and other cultural activities are – yet the difference of 'the arts' is the reason for having arts-support bodies.

They were expected to support new work by encouraging artists and art organisations to take risks not likely to be welcome on the purely commercial market. If it is suggested that 'The arts industry has to turn its attention away from the supply side of the arts equation to the creation of a higher level of demand from arts consumers' then doesn't that mean concentrating on activities that are close to market success anyway, rather than *offsetting* the market's failures? But if that is so what would be the point of having arts support bodies?

This unwholesome process was taking its first confident steps down into the pits when I was still around – especially in the invention of that treacherous phrase 'the arts industry' – a Trojan horse if ever there was one. Yet this phrase shouldn't have got any hearing at all – for a simple reason that makes commercial as well as moral sense. The reason is that in ordinary people's minds *there is no the arts industry*. There is a publishing industry, yes; there's a music industry, yes; there is a television industry, a film industry, a theatre industry, a dance industry, a design industry, and so on and some of what they produce is thought of as art, although most of it isn't. In fact the expression 'the arts' has no fixed meaning in the usage of ordinary people. None. If you run a campaign promoting beef people know what beef means and where to go and buy it. They can get it at the butcher's or at a supermarket. But if you run a campaign promoting 'the arts' people don't know what you mean, and since there isn't a 'the arts' shop anywhere they don't know where to buy it.

Of course I realise that when you're talking to people who speak the language of the economisation of culture you have to use a few familiar phrases to put them at their ease. I used to get good mileage out of repetition of just one of them - the phrase 'R and D' ... 'The Australia Council is a superb R and D program', I would say. 'Many of the discoveries of the arts amplify into the wider culture. Look at *Crocodile Dundee* ... All of its characters and all of its landscapes had long before been worked out by Australian writers and artists.' And so on. I admired enormously the way, in his *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, Jon Hawkes has spoken the language of the people he wants to reach – 'wellbeing', 'diversity', 'regional distinctiveness', 'capacity building', 'sustainability', 'involvement' and so on – and given it new meaning.

Now to the post-industrial society.

For some people there was once a period in prosperous societies such as Australia of hopeful prophecy. It began somewhere in the late 1960s when talk began to float around about the shift from economies that were fundamentally concerned with producing *goods* to economies whose main dynamic was providing *services*.

It would mean manufacturing would cease to be the central employment dynamo.

And it would mean there could be an enormous spread in cultural and recreational pursuits – which could become new dynamos of economic growth.

Well ... much of it has been happening. What are now seen as regional centres began to look to the founding of universities as they used to look to the construction of butter factories or abattoirs. Briefly, the Ord River dam was a ferro-concrete icon of progress; then it was replaced by the Sydney Opera House. And the idea of a cultural centre became one of the recognised agenda items of regional councils. In North Queensland tourism and sightseeing replaced sugar as the principal industry and in Douglas Shire environmentalism became both a living creed and a money spinner. Byron Bay, once a failed fishing settlement dominated by a smelly abattoir, now runs what I see as Australia's best writers' festival – whose living base is in its own community. Wagga Wagga has an art glass collection of national significance. The Pioneer Women's Hut at Tumbarumba became, I believe, one of the best small community museums in the world – the women of Tumbarumba told their own story and the story of pioneer women generally. And so, on and on, through many more examples. This is something that you are all more familiar with than I am.

But how far have we really gone? For people like me, who lived in an Australian country town in the late 1920s and early 1930s the answer is – unbelievably far.

But how far have we come compared with the aspirations for the new post-industrial age that began to be expressed by a few people in the late 1960s? The answer is that the economic base is there now, up and going,



but much of the imagination hasn't yet arrived. For the moment it's somewhere in lost luggage. Back then, there was the humane and happy view that 'creativity' could come into its own, not only as a background to the new technological marvels but also *for itself - uselessly* - particularly in the arts and humanities and public intellectual life. And not just for the practitioners. Most people would have more time on their hands, it was believed back then, and many of them might wish, in their own ways, to expand their lives in greater 'recreational pursuits' - including a greater engagement with the arts and with intellectual life - not just as 'consumers', but as people who could become critically engaged and do things for themselves.

At the time Barry Jones was pushed out of the presidency of the ALP he said: 'My main preoccupation ... in public life, has been the promotion of the "abundant life": the conviction that the overwhelming majority of people are capable of responding to a far greater richness of experience than is commonly recognised ... I was always impressed (he went on) by ... an English radical pamphlet dating from 1821, which said: "The first indication of real wealth and prosperity is that people can work less. Wealth is liberty - liberty to seek recreation, liberty to enjoy life, liberty to improve the mind. It is *disposable time*, and nothing more.' Imagine what it would have been like if Simon Crean had said one tenth of that - make it one twentieth - at the recent ALP conference.

I used to talk like that. Yes, I know this is rhetoric ... But rhetoric is an essential beginning for any program for change. The question is: which *rhetoric do you want?* The rhetoric which says 'the overwhelming majority of people are capable of responding to a far greater richness of experience than is commonly recognised'? Or the rhetoric that says 'Artists have been elevated to the high table of economic policy'?

But who is going to provide these new ways of looking at things? Intellectuals, usually, but there doesn't seem to be much going on. No great, accessible, possibly workable theories. And ultimately you need political leaders who have a talent for expressing a new faith in new terms that people can understand and see in their own interests. Even less going on there.

It seems to me, however, that one place to look might be 'the regions'. They're smaller, more comprehensible - and, as between them, *remarkably diverse*. (Perhaps Tasmania would have a better future if it defined itself as a region.) In the Howard years the old phrase 'the bush' has gone through a big revival, keeping pace with the number of politicians who wear Akubras - yet this is at the very time when the old meanings have almost entirely lost their material base and their social structure. The idea of 'regional centres' - in all their diversity - is a much more valuable way of looking to the future than nostalgia about a stereotype called 'the bush'. And it's here that extending vision from 'the arts' to 'cultural life' might be most valuable, especially if people in 'the regions' began to consider more their own particularity and *tell their own stories* - by whatever means - big or small - so that they themselves have something to think about - and also give visitors something to think about as well. (I'm not suggesting concentrating on the parochial - but at least having an occasional look.

Unlikely? Well, let me put it this way: how likely was the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games? It was one of the most original performances ever devised for stadium theatre. But also one that evoked a relaxed, confident, outgoing and sophisticated Australia able both to believe in itself and to laugh at itself, an Australia of originality, and an Australia with its own style, an Australia of creativity and high spirits.

Can we unveil that Australia - *It is all around us* ... perhaps it's waiting for us to open our eyes.