Why the Arts should be funded.

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When newly elected Queensland Premier Campbell Newman cut his state's prestigious literary awards as one of his first acts of government, he was sending a message. Budgets are tight and we are squeezing the arts. In a statement he said, "Right now, our state finances are in a diabolical position… And I say to my fellow Queenslanders, we promised we would focus on frontline services." He went on to say that "we will make no apologies for going into all areas of government and cutting things out that right now are preventing more police, more fire fighters, more nurses, more doctors, Tier One funding for the Cairns Hospital. Save the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves."

No concentrating on frivolity and the indulgences of the latte set when there were roads to build and nurses to train. Fair enough but when, a few days later, at a whim, a street parade for the Brisbane soccer team (the Brisbane Roar) was announced, claims of fiscal responsibility and the talk of saving pennies seemed much less credible.

Newman probably thought he was on safe ground going after the elites that those of his political ilk so like to disparage and mock. But to aim political spin around cuts in arts funding at the elite misunderstands the broader contribution and influence that the arts and creative practice has on the community and also ignores the community engagement with it that goes well beyond the privileged.

One of the biggest struggles in Indigenous Australia to close the gap is to improve literacy skills amongst Aboriginal children.

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students emerges early. Non-Indigenous students far out-perform Indigenous students in benchmark tests for reading, writing and numeracy in Year 3 and Year 5. By Year 7, the gap has widened, particularly for numeracy. By the age of 15, more than one-third of Australia's Indigenous students don't have the skills and knowledge in reading literacy needed at the later age level and will be disadvantaged in their lives beyond school'.

Without good literacy skills, it is hard to improve the life opportunities of young Indigenous children and Indigenous adults. There are a range of things needed to improve this statistical disparity between Indigenous children and their peers. Amongst them are better teacher training, dealing with other related factors such as health issues and overcrowding (factors that can impact on learning ability), but amongst them is the need to develop a love of reading and writing in children.

This last goal isn't helped when writers and their craft of creative writing are treated as elitist, over-divulged and out of touch.

Amongst the awards that Campbell Neman decided not to fund was the David Uniapon award for Indigenous writing. The award was for an unpublished manuscript and included the editorial assistance to get the book published. These weren't writers sitting around sipping lattes. They included former stockmen or women brought up on missions who had little education but had, through the award of this literary prize, the chance to get their stories published so the rest of the world could hear them. Recipients included Doris Pilkington, who would go on to write Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence.

But Newman's snide view of the arts and his dismissal of it's worth is also bad economic sense. It's no secret that investment in the arts is a good policy strategy.

I visited Bendigo earlier this year with my husband and four of our friends. Nothing had ever tempted me there before but an exhibition of Grace Kelly's clothes did. Trivial? I'd defend fashion as an art form any day. And thousands of others – in fact, about 150 thousand others – felt the same way. The exhibition sold out the day I was there. And as a result, the hotels were completely booked out and the restaurants bursting. Café's had begun opening for breakfast to take advantage of the crowds; shops along the main streets were filled with passing trade. A local told me that they could not believe the money that had flooded into the town - money that went to local small businesses and created work for the local community. One exhibition in a regional gallery was an economic boost to an entire community. The City of Bendigo estimated the economic impact of the exhibition at $17 million.

Similarly, over the last year, I have made two trips to Hobart – one with just my husband and another with several friends as well – that I would not have otherwise taken for the primary purpose of seeing the Museum of New and Old Art (MONA). The contents are unconventional, confrontational and not to everyone's taste, but they have brought in the crowds. And with the crowds comes the peripheral economic benefits to hotels, local business, including restaurants, and to the small towns we visited and ate and shopped at that we would not have otherwise been to.

Queensland in particular should be now well aware that the pennies invested in arts deliver economic dollars. The long term investment in the arts precinct on Brisbane's Southbank has not only seen that area come alive, it has also seen, with innovative shows that have only been held in Brisbane, its fair share of the cultural tourism dollar. The Gallery of Modern Art, to take one example, has had the only Australian exhibitions of Picasso, Warhol and of the couture of Valentino – all with large attendances with a large proportion of visitors travelling to see the show.

But there are other, non-economic benefits that also show the rewards of investment in the arts.

I have already touched on the educational value, the importance of developing writers and the importance of valuing writing and particularly in encouraging a love of creativity. A literacy program that I am involved with is the Sydney Story Factory. It has established a shop front in the main street of Redfern in Sydney and has been designed as a Martian Embassy with all things Mars and Martian inside. This has attracted children from the surrounding areas with the program particularly targeting children from low socio-economic backgrounds. The program focuses on children that are struggling as well as the children in that area that are excelling. The Sydney Story Factory was a project that was started by writers and writers are involved in running the workshops with the children.

I pause to think of my own experience. My grandmother was removed under the child removal policy, my parents were working class, there are large parts of my Aboriginal family that remain extremely impoverished. My own social and economic mobility is in thanks in great part to my education, which I engaged in from an early age when I was taught – and came to love – reading and writing. We struggle with trying to overcome Indigenous disadvantage, especially at a community level, but there is no greater transformative agent than education – and that starts with the basics of reading and writing.

But there are also the rehabilitative and therapeutic benefits of art. I work in prisons and I have seen the power of art in programs there. For men who have unresolved anger issues and low self esteem, finding a way to express emotion through art can be cathartic - and rehabilitative.

This has been especially true of Indigenous men who have also reconnected to their culture through art programs that as a result give them greater self-esteem and a self-respect they have never had. A great outcome for them; an even better one for the community they will be released back into.

Another example of the additional role that arts play can be seen in the example of the Bangarra Dance Company – which I have the honour of chairing. In a new program we have started called Rekindling, we run programs in regional New South Wales which uses dance as a way of engaging young Indigenous people in performance. There are many types of programs like this that use performing arts to engage children and they have – as well as introducing children to that art form – many other benefits including the building of confidence, the benefits of physical activity and introducing concepts of respect for ones self and ones body.

Newman's "saving the pennies" and the "saving frontline jobs" rhetoric espoused when cutting the literary awards was safe ground because it is easy to dismiss literary awards and literature as elitist with political spin. Newman's government recently contributed $200 000 – almost the amount of the literary awards, into the production company that makes Big Brother. The justification was the 300 jobs created and the number of visitors the show brings to the Gold Coast – estimated to be 40 000 – and all the associated expenditure, including trips to Dreamworld – that those crowds generate. So here are the principles of cultural tourism at work. So why is it politically easy to invest scarce resources needed for doctors, teachers and fire-fighters on Big Brother but not on literary awards and boosting the publishing industry and promoting literacy?

Now, the cultural tourism examples I mentioned earlier are a distinctive form of investment in the arts. Funding an exhibition that thousands will attend is different to funding literary awards but let me make this point that shows why the economic benefits should not be the sole driver of where we invest in the arts. The examples of cultural tourism I gave are experiences much more accessible to middle-class Australians but the examples I have just mentioned where there is no immediate stimulation of the economy – the literacy programs, children's programs and rehabilitation programs – are creative practices enjoyed by the marginalised and disadvantaged. And though they do not generate tourist dollars, they generate their own rewards through building a more skilled and creative community.

I think the economic benefits of arts are an important contribution they make but I don't think it should be the sole determinant of where we invest in the arts. And I think the educational, therapeutic and rehabilitative aspects are also important. But I don't think they should be the exclusive criteria either.

Arts and creative practice are, in and of themselves, important. They are an expression of who we are as people, of ideas that challenge us, that make us think about what we believe in and what it means to be human. The importance of arts to a community and its culture is a reason in and of itself for governments to support them, to show that they are valued and meaningful.

And they give us pleasure. And you can't put a dollar value on that. As much as watching a football or cricket game gives great pleasure to some, a Bach concert or a ballet performance give that same pleasure to others.

And the diversity of cultural practices that we enjoy as a community are a vast spectrum – I would include everything from ballet, modern dance and burlesque, symphonies, jazz and theatre-sports, the myriad of galleries and museums, the performances at large and small theatre companies, films and home arts such as knitting and cross-stitch – as all part of our creative industries, creative practice and the arts.

The people who enjoy this broad spectrum of the arts are varied too. In an interesting survey NSW Galleries and Museums undertook of over 7000 of their attendees across the state they found that:

If you have 10 people standing in front of an artwork in a public gallery, it is likely that:

- At least two will be tourists;
- Four will be from a household earning less than $40,000 and only two of them will be from a household earning more than $80,000;
- At least five will live within the gallery's local government area;
- Two will have finished school at secondary level, and
- Two will have a post graduate degree;
- Almost all of them will have rated their visit as "Good" or "Terrific".

This socio-economic profile is interesting and indicates that the engagement with art in galleries is much broader than many would perhaps believe.

So I think we need to value and invest in the arts because they are – as well as with all the other benefits – in and of themselves important.

Art critic Robert Hughes, sadly recently departed, captured this beautifully when he wrote: "The basic project of art is always to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore it to us in all its glory and its occasional nastiness, not through argument but through feeling, and then to close the gap between you and everything that is not you, and in this way pass from feeling to meaning. It's not something that committees can do. It's not a task achieved by groups or by movements. It's done by individuals, each person mediating in some way between a sense of history and an experience of the world."

What Hughes captures in this sentiment is that creative practice – rich, thoughtful, provocative creative practice – makes a valuable contribution to our society by helping us ask big questions and engage with the world around us.

But he makes another point that is important and that is that some of the best creative practice is, by its nature, an individual pursuit. And this can make it less attractive as an investment for governments and policy makers, make it more vulnerable to being tagged as something only the elite can engage in.

I read recently that we spent over $10 million in tax payers money per gold medal at the last Olympics. It was a statistic that raised several issues for me not the least being how silly it can seem to put an economic value on something whose main outcome is pleasure or enjoyment. I didn't watch the Olympics. It's not really my thing though I don't mind the gymnastics. But I am sure that for many who did, the gold medal part was only one aspect of what they enjoyed about the hours and hours they consumed of watching the best athletes in the world compete in such a broad range of sports.

But it was also a reminder that in the area of sport, investment in the individual is much more likely to be seen as an investment in a broader societal good. I don't begrudge the money spent on developing elite athletes but I would like to see a shift in mindset that saw the investment of elite individuals who have a talent in the creative arts in the same way – and ideas like a living wage for artists more readily seen as an appropriate investment in individual excellence.

I would like to just make two quick points on other policy issues that flow from what I have said.

I think it is important to have a national cultural policy that prioritizes spending on arts, creative practice and heritage. It is an important step that one is being developed. I think it is critical that as well as focusing on national stories and the economic benefits of the arts, it also thinks of strategies to fund art in order to gain excellence.

And it also needs to understand the importance of art for it's own sake.

There is an increase of activity and interest in philanthropy in the arts sector. Private donations can add extraordinarily to the capacity of individuals and organizations to engage in creative pursuits. We have some high benchmarks in this area. The gift of $15 million to the Museum of Contemporary Art by Simon and Catriona Mordant shows a level of personal generosity towards public good that is inspiring. Many of us involved with the arts see the potential to expand and value add to our core activities through philanthropic donations. But this should never be seen as a substitute or alternative to government funding for core arts practice, it is important that governments send a message that arts are important and the best way to send that message is to put their money where their mouth is and continue to fund the core activities of artists and art organizations.

The second policy matter that I want to note is the narrowness of the Close the Gap agenda. I have already articulated how important I think the concept of closing the gap is in relation to literacy. I think the aim of closing the socio-economic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on measures such as health, housing, education and employment is critical. This agenda – that has attracted the name of Closing the Gap – has been widely embraced and is relatively uncontroversial. But it is a socio-economic agenda only.

There is nothing in the indicators that measure or protect Indigenous culture and heritage. Nothing about language preservation.

Indigenous culture can have an economic value - art is highly sought, international tourists are interested in it. But again, this is only one reason and not the most important reason to support.

I would like to see an Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same opportunities and life chances as all other Australians and in this Australia, Indigenous cultures, experiences and history are seen as central to the Australian story and cultural identity. And we can't have that without a vibrant Aboriginal culture supported by cultural practice.

The close the gap agenda currently overlooks this. A national cultural policy could go a long way to address. But it is important we see the two as intricately linked.

I have focused on Campbell Newman tonight so I want to end with one final point that appreciates his popularist but misguided attitude towards literary excellence is not a partisan position.

The NSW O'Farrell government amidst the same rhetoric of mismanagement of funds by the previous Labor government did inject funds into some arts companies previously underfunded by their predecessors and is looking to invest in the redevelopment of part of the Walsh Bay area to expand it as a place of arts activity. So did the Ballieu in Victoria who began their term with an injection of funds into Circus Oz that included investment in infrastructure.

The ability to see investment in arts as an investment in community and culture is not something confined to party lines. It's not a left wing/right wing thing, it’s simply a smart policy, dumb policy thing.