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Cultural politics: who cares about the arts?

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Abstract

The fact that the arts haven’t starred in this election and its media coverage is perhaps no big surprise. But it sends a disturbing signal about the place of the arts in our public discourse.

When Arts Minister Tony Burke and shadow arts spokesperson George Brandis addressed an arts forum in Western Sydney last week it was one of the few moments when the arts got a focus in media reporting, but even then coverage was scant. A single story appeared in the Fairfax papers, The Australian followed up their debate story with a Brandis profile and this week the debate was recapped on the ABC’s Arts Quarter with commentary from Griffith Review’s Julianne Schultz.

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Although sparks flew over whether Brandis would censor Australia Council funding decisions after his attempt to introduce a Ministerial veto clause into legislation earlier this year neither side promised any new funding for the arts. In fact Brandis confirmed spending cuts:

“Senator Brandis confirmed that a Coalition government would reduce spending on the arts, however he did not know when the Coalition’s policy costings would be revealed.

“Whatever economies there are in the portfolio will be modest and will be apparent from the costings,” he said.

“I think people in the arts who listened to Mr Burke’s scare campaign will be very happy.”

This was one “scare campaign” that generated very little media or public interest. There’s a reason for this: an Essential poll, in the first week of the election, showed that voters who believed that governments should cut services to reduce the deficit nominated foreign aid and arts funding as their first two priorities for the razor gang.

I’d make two observations about all this. Firstly the arts lobby seems to be missing in action this election, and secondly, given most publications have arts editors and arts sections this area ought to have been given more coverage.

The arts lobby – a well organized and well connected group who have successfully marshaled great campaigns in the past – probably recognize that in the current, highly polarized, short campaign there is relatively little hope of arts issues gaining traction. It’s a choose-your-battles decision.

But I would suggest that perhaps this is not the right strategy. There is indeed little hope of leveraging major new funding initiatives from either party, but elections are, in part, about defining a national agenda: they are dialogues about the future. For the voice of the arts to be missing from this dialogue sends a bad long-term signal about the place of the arts in Australian public life.
The media’s lack of interest can be explained as a product of the failure of the arts to emerge powerfully in the discourse of either party and the failure of arts groups to intervene to change this.

But given that nearly all major newspapers have arts focused sections and supplements why haven’t these sections, whose task it is to cover the arts, produced comprehensive coverage of each party’s arts policies and arts record? Part of the answer to this is that arts coverage in many newspapers has been subject to both staff cuts and an increasing commercialization over recent years and their ability to produce critical arts coverage has been diluted.

*The Australian* has in many ways bucked this trend and continued to provide high quality arts reporting and critique and it has done a somewhat better job than other outlets at covering the arts in this election.

Arts correspondent Matthew Westwood (an excellent and very experienced arts journalist) has filed several stories: apart from the debate and Brandis profile pieces, he covered Julianne Schultz’s call for a new culture super ministry (also covered by *The Conversation*). His colleague Michaela Boland contributed a critique of Labor’s Creative Young Stars grants scheme which Brandis claimed was being used for political purposes in marginal electorates. But like their broader political coverage, which has been criticized for a Liberal bias, the paper’s arts election coverage is also leaning towards the Libs, with Brandis getting star billing.