

12 Persistent encounters: the Australia Council and multiculturalism

Annette Blonski

There is corporate memory or, to be more precise, memories in organisations such as the Australia Council which are easily lost. Staff changes are frequent as is turnover on committees and boards. The latter is a matter of policy; the former a familiar occurrence in all arts organisations in Australia. It is by no means as much of a problem at the Australia Council or other government agencies as it is in the organisations they fund, which suffer comparatively greater constraints on staffing levels and infrastructure. But, despite the mountains of paper work which record the debates, the disputes and changing policies, when people leave their insights and knowledge departs with them. The sense of both the continuities and discontinuities can, and does, easily disappear.

But corporate memory is also partial. A formal history, one which relies on both written records of an organisation or individuals and their memory and observations, can tease out the causal relationships and continuities between events and trace the discontinuities, the lacunae, the gaps. It, too, can only partially account for the complex dynamic, personal and power relationships that exist within an institution, particularly if that history is public history, commissioned and politically strategic. These are narratives, after all, and only fragments.

The Australia Council is the federal government's principal arts funding and policy agency. Since its inception (in its present form) in 1973, it has been confronted by demands which challenge its central value systems and modes of operation such as agitation around the question of women and the arts, regionalism, debates

about the effectiveness or otherwise of its assessment procedures, among many others. Arguments about 'ethnic arts', which was the term used in the 1970s¹, surfaced very early in the life of the Australia Council. Its encounter with multiculturalism has been an extended and dramatic one, and it has by no means come to its conclusion.

There is a high degree of interaction and involvement between the arts community and the Australia Council. This is due, in part, to its policy of peer assessment and committee structure. Unlike its sister organisations, the Australian Film Commission and the Film Finance Corporation, the Council has continued to be both at arm's length from government in terms of its decision making and has retained a system of peer review. The Australian Film Commission abandoned peer assessment three years ago with the result that, aside from the use of outside readers and budget consultants, its funding decisions are made either by senior project managers or the Board of Commissioners. Peer assessment was never considered as part of the Film Finance Corporation's mode of operation or charter. In the system at the Australia Council, by contrast, arts practitioners are appointed for limited terms to committees and boards and their funding decisions and policy discussions influence the shape and scope of arts activities across Australia and across artforms. These artforms include the performing arts, the visual arts and literature, and funding is provided both in the form of grants to individuals, for projects, community arts and for organisational infrastructure.

It does not necessarily follow that this level of representation and interaction will result in a diversity of viewpoints, understandings and practices either in the committees, the areas and individuals they support, or among the staff. Selection practices can work to consolidate particular positions or favour particular styles and genres of work. What has happened in recent years at the Australia Council has been an attempt to redress this problem and ensure that cultural diversity and inclusivity are embedded in all aspects of its operations and policies. What follows here is based on a history that was commissioned by the Australia Council at the request of the Australia Council Multicultural Arts Committee (ACMAC). This committee and the structures and activities around it are part of the attempt to transform the Australia Council into an institution that is responsive to the profound changes that are taking place in Australia's culture. And the history was one way of ensuring that knowledge of what had gone before was not lost.

The barbarians at the gate

Several high-profile arts practitioners spoke publicly early in 1993

of their opposition to many of the Australia Council's funding policies and practices. The murmuring in private was equally fierce. While the attacks ranged over a variety of different issues, one surfaced without fail: multiculturalism. The umbrella term most commonly adopted to capture all the discourses under attack was 'political correctness'. Two of the more public incursions include that delivered by the playwright Louis Nowra about the Literature Board in an address to the National Press Club and articles by the poet Les Murray which appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* (Murray, 1993, p. 11).

While these were serious in tone, the *Age's* theatre critic, Leonard Radic, opted for satire to lampoon the Performing Arts Board on the question of cultural diversity. A statement by Carillo Gantner, at that time the Chair of the Performing Arts Board, is used as a starting point for Radic's 'letter' to the Board. Gantner stated that funding had been directed towards 'work that is cutting-edge and uniquely Australian, and today that means multicultural'. Radic, in reply, offers a grant proposal that:

. . . crosses the stylistic boundaries between opera, drama, music theatre and streetwalking. It comes with songs in a variety of languages, played on authentic regional instruments . . . and is designed . . . for a multiracial cast, all speaking from time to time in their native tongues. (Radic, 1993, p. 10)

His qualifications, he states, are that he is a 'third-generation ethnic Yugoslav (sorry, Croatian)' and his inheritance is therefore that of 'working-class-made good, rich in cultural diversity and ethnicity'. The article concludes with the statement that he has no experience in 'this kind of writing' but that one or two people with experience and track records have been given grants, implying, therefore, that he should have no difficulty since the remainder were, like him, without merit.

Radic's assumptions have been part of the underlying struggle over this contested ground since at least the late 1970s. In Radic's view there is an inescapable association of the arts and cultural diversity with the amateur, with work that is less than excellent, with decisions made, not on merit, but as part of an agenda that is foreign to the arts. By invoking the Balkans, Radic raises the spectre of something divisive and dangerous in our midst: of the barbarians at the door.

In case it could be inferred that locals are the only targets, witness this back-handed compliment in Michele Field's introduction to an interview with Edward Said in the monthly magazine *24 Hours*:

Fervent multiculturalists are spitting mad about the dominance of DWEMs (Dead White European Males). When you meet Edward

Said you think of 'Dapper White European Males' but the 'European' is only as deep as his fine suits: the rest is American or Arab.

This is worth mentioning because Said's natty style is so unlike that of the academics who usually endorse multiculturalism. An issue which, at times, tended to be associated with ratbags, is here being elucidated by someone who is tailored and articulate. It puts some of the things he says in a new context, I think. Although he is pleading for a change of attitude towards third world and 'middle' cultures, he does so with the panache of a colonial governor. (Field, 1993, p. 42)

More than likely, this was intended as a playful piece of journalism. But would the joke have been acceptable if it were one about being gay and passing for straight, or being black and passing for white? As long as the interlocutor who speaks from the margins in this unwelcome tongue is well-mannered and appropriately dressed, he or she will be taken seriously and can enter the portals of the mainstream of cultural discourse. The barbarians can be kept at bay.

This, together with Radic's open letter to the Performing Arts Board, acutely convey something of the anxiety that profound cultural change of the kind represented by the arts for a multicultural policy of the Australia Council represents. That it has surfaced in this concentrated fashion at this time is partly indicative of the continuing resistance to multiculturalism and an unwillingness to engage with it which often results in oversimplification and exaggeration (by design or otherwise). In part, though, it is also a symptom of the degree to which the policy is beginning to bite, of the extent to which it is being absorbed, not only into the rhetoric but the practice of institutions such as the Australia Council.

One of the most striking features of the Australia Council is its organisational structure. The Boards have always had wide powers to determine their own policy, their assessment procedures and the terms of evaluation employed in assessing projects and setting priorities. Thus it is common throughout the history of Council for there to be substantial differences between the Boards and Council itself, the latter having the task of setting overall policy parameters. So, when Council developed strategies to more actively target 'ethnic' artists and support multicultural projects, which the Boards were then required to take up, many did so but without enthusiasm. It is ironic then that Radic should target the Performing Arts Board because, with the exception of the Crafts Committee in the 1970s and early 1980s and the Community Arts Committees and Boards throughout the life of Council, all the other Boards had been reluctant to support reforms which would target NESB artists and projects. The Performing Arts Board's current view of multiculturalism is a very recent phenomenon and indicative of a significant shift

within all the Boards, across the Australia Council, with regard to the Arts for a Multicultural Australia Policy.

That is not to say that problems were not acknowledged earlier. In 1984, the Theatre Board undertook a review of 'Multicultural Theatre Projects' in which it found that most applications received from ethnic artists or theatre companies were rejected. The reasons for rejection included the fact that the artists and their work were not known to the Board, nor did they meet the Board's guidelines for professionalism. Moreover, the Board found that ethnic artists faced particular problems because their qualifications and experience were not recognised in Australia nor regarded as equivalent with RADA or the Royal Shakespeare Company in the United Kingdom. Ethnic artists also had difficulty fitting in with established companies and with the different theatrical traditions here; and employers were reluctant to appoint artists with 'poor' English or with foreign accents. The Board resolved, therefore, to put in place a number of initiatives to offset the effects of these barriers. It acknowledged that its insistence on a narrow definition of professionalism (a key criterion) was restrictive and Eurocentric in origin and moved to modify it. At the same time it expressed grave concern that a change in the definition would 'open the floodgates'. And the reforms it proposed were only to be implemented where they involved small amounts of money.

The dilemma expressed at this particular point both in the Board's and the Australia Council's history exemplifies the position of the arts administrator and arts administrations. They are faced with a set of competing pressures and discourses: the challenge to the mainstream values and criteria which have hitherto informed all funding and program support policies; a willingness on their part to not only engage with the critiques offered from the field and, in response, the changing nature of cultural production but also a profound fear of loss to the core culture; and the demands of an ever-shrinking budget alongside pressure to create ever-greater administrative efficiencies and productivity.

The Australia Council's response to the discourses of multiculturalism and its implications for individual artists, arts practice and its own funding and policy positions, has been a history of internal, often bitter debate, resistance and embrace. At first, arguments in support of specific initiatives to assist NESB artists and their work were seen to be largely questions of social justice, of access and equity. It was often seen to be a problem rather than perceived in terms of the potential to the arts in Australia and Australian culture more generally. Even when there was acknowledgement that the implications went to the heart of concepts about Australian culture, it was viewed as an additional area of responsi-

bility to be catered for out of diminishing resources. In the last three years, however, due in part to the foundations laid in the first fifteen years of Council's existence, the approach to issues of cultural diversity have significantly changed both Council's own practices and, potentially, its relationship with artists and arts practitioners.

Reform and public policy

According to Peter Wilenski (1987, pp. 167-9), reforms initiated by government to administrative practices (which have continued since the early 1980s) are aimed at producing a more efficient, a more democratic and a more equitable administration. All aspects of government, including the arts, have been under review. According to Anna Yeatman (1990) the context in which such reforms have come about reflects 'the emergence of a plurality of social movements, pressure groups and single issue groups which are no longer containable within the established party system and its reach into types of representation within the bureaucratic modes of decision making' (Yeatman, 1990, p. 4).

However, the three strands, as identified by Wilenski, are not necessarily complementary, and one may easily gain ascendancy over the other. The call for an efficient administration, for example, might well be at odds with the development of more open, democratic and accessible structures. On at least two occasions in the Australia Council's history, the pressure of budget cuts, restructuring and devolution of funding, coming in the guise of efficiency in the administration of public resources, has resulted in major impediments to the development and implementation of multicultural policy and programs.

The first was in 1976. A report by McKinsey and Company was highly critical of the Australia Council's structures and operations. It recommended that all but two committees be abolished, and this included an Ethnic Arts Committee which had been formed in 1975. The committees it recommended retaining were, predictably, Administration and Finance, although after much agitation, the Community Arts Committee also managed to survive the purge.

The Ethnic Arts Committee had initiated research projects, questioned the very notion of 'ethnic arts' and the linkage with traditional arts, and had sought to begin the process of locating and documenting migrants and others of ethnic background engaged in the arts. They had plans to create archival records and resource centres, sponsor films on the migrant experience and educate children to 'embrace ancestral culture'. The Committee reported regularly to Council. Two research projects were completed in 1977, one by Gail

Holst and the other by Antigone Kefala, but they were not circulated widely as was the original intention. Fortunately, however, Kefala later became a significant force within Council as its Multicultural Arts Officer, a post she held until 1987.

In 1976 and 1977, though, the outlook was bleak. Holst's survey had revealed that 90 per cent of ethnic groups surveyed did not know of the existence or purpose of the Australia Council. The Community Arts Committee continued to respond to the issue of 'ethnic arts' but resources were negligible. The Chair of the Ethnic Arts Committee, Evasio Costanzo, having drawn the attention of Council in 1977 to the disastrous effects of Australia's policy of assimilation with regards to migrants, exhorted Council to address urgently the needs of ethnic artists and their communities. However, Council did not directly respond to these calls for action and the Ethnic Arts Committee was abandoned.

A little over ten years later, in 1986–87, the Australia Council suffered substantial budget cuts. At the same time, following the recommendations of the McLeay Report, there was a major restructure of the Boards and Committees of Council. For a period of about five years, from 1982, there had been rapid and positive change in Council's response to questions of multiculturalism and the arts, and increased levels of funding to NESB artists and their projects or organisations and groups. This too had been the result of government intervention, and will be discussed later in this chapter. But the momentum foundered as a result of the restructure and the loss of key staff when they either resigned or were transferred. On both occasions, the majority of the Boards of the Australia Council and Council members themselves did not appear to be concerned with the fate of multicultural programs and policies as they were not seen as central or core elements of their role. Nevertheless, there had been significant initiatives: the Boards funded or assisted publications, conferences, research, the growth of networks and funding, and the growing visibility within Council of NESB artists. But these two moments in the Australia Council's history amply demonstrated the ascendancy of the managerialist over the more democratic and equitable reform strands.

Multiculturalism at the Australia Council

Whereas the McKinsey and Company and McLeay Reports were instrumental in the winding back, or stalling, of reforms, the drive towards change was being carried both by individuals and groups outside and within Council. They were able to take advantage of government interventions that were not driven by the imperative

towards efficiency and budgetary constraint, but by considerations of social justice and equity. And this, in turn, was prompted by community pressure and the larger political and cultural context of the period. The history of the development and struggle over multicultural policy at the Australia Council can be characterised as having passed through three quite distinct phases.

The first phase, between 1973 and 1982, was marked by extensive national field work undertaken by individual project officers, in particular Antigone Kefala. This field work was aimed at ascertaining who the artists were and what they were doing; finding ways of assisting them; and raising awareness of the arts and individual artists within the ethnic communities themselves. There were also consistent attempts made by project officers and the Community Arts Committee (particularly its Director, Rosalie Bower) to raise the issue, and profile, of what was then termed 'migrant' or 'ethnic' arts within Council. However, development of policy and programs was inhibited because it was regarded as a low priority.

Ethnic arts were almost always associated with either community arts or 'folk' and 'traditional' arts. Both traditional and folk arts had been defined by Council as largely outside its areas of responsibility. It wanted to concentrate its activities on contemporary art practice and failed, generally speaking, to recognise that many ethnic artists were, in fact, also working within contemporary artforms. Also, what was defined by Council as 'traditional' was often part of a classical repertoire in non-Western, non-European cultures. Artists who were working within the European classical or high art traditions such as classical dance or music were supported by Council but there was little recognition of the equivalent such as classical Indian dance music during this period. Small amounts of funding were provided to theatre or dance groups, for example, and to individual artists, but there was no policy as such and funding support remained at a low level. Council's lack of recognition could also be seen in the reluctant establishment and subsequent abandonment of the Ethnic Arts Committee of 1975-76 and a Multicultural Arts Committee which was formed in 1980 and only met once.

During this period the Australia Council, along with other government instrumentalities, was the subject of the Galbally Report (Review of Post Arrival Programs and Services for Migrants, 1978). Its findings were not favourable and Recommendation 50 of the Galbally Report stated that the Australia Council should:

... develop closer links with ethnic communities and that it reassess its budgetary allocation in order to ensure that ethnic arts receive a more equitable amount.

As a result, Council and the Boards did move more rapidly

towards increasing monetary support, but by 1980 the majority of the initiatives were still coming from the Community Arts Board. The other Boards argued that no special initiatives or programs were required and insisted that the criterion of 'excellence' was the overriding consideration. The Management Committee of Council, however, tackled the question directly. It referred Council to the Galbally Report's insistence on the need to adopt notions of equal opportunity, the encouragement of self-help and the need to combat prejudice and discrimination, and pointed out that the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board at the time of the Council's own inception implied recognition of these fundamental principles. As a statutory authority, the Australia Council was therefore under an obligation to serve all Australians and that meant tackling the implications of multiculturalism.

Both the Community Arts Board and the Management Committee argued that this did not mean that Council would be compromising its other charter which was to support excellence. They pointed out that excellence itself was a relative term and that the Boards' objections to special programs arose from a narrow aesthetic base.

In the following year, the Management Committee and the Community Arts Board, under the stewardship of Andrea Hull, continued to push for reform through Council and gave advice to the minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. However, Council's response was slow and, in 1982, Council policy was once again subject to review. The Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) was given the task of evaluating the institutions which had been the subject of the Galbally Report. AIMA was highly critical of the Australia Council, finding that the Council's response to Recommendation 50 had been inadequate.

AIMA's criticisms led to major policy upheaval and change within Council. Council-wide policy was developed and the position of designated project officer, reporting to Council as well as working with the Boards, was established. The project officer then responsible for multicultural arts, Maria Sbizziri (Kefala was on leave), proposed major structural changes which were accepted by Council and with these reforms came the second phase. On Kefala's return, a second project officer, Alexandra Karakostas-Seda, was appointed to help implement the new policies and programs. Thus, the congruence of these developments—government pressure reflecting significant shifts in public policy and the growing confidence of individual staff members within Council—laid the basis for rapid change and consolidation in the period 1982–86.

Because Council identified multiculturalism as a priority, all the Boards were required to integrate this priority concern into their own programs. Central incentive funds were established which effectively

geared funding from each of the Boards for ethnic artists and multicultural projects. (Other Incentive Funds included Art in Working Life, Youth Arts and Artists in the Community.) What constituted multicultural projects and how ethnic artists could be defined was also established and agreed upon. This meant that the program could be implemented and monitored with greater consistency across all the Boards of the Australia Council.

A number of long-term projects were initiated. These included the publication of booklets and articles which celebrated and publicised the achievements of NESB artists; the development of research projects to garner more information as the basis for future policy development; the establishment of a Council Committee; the support of conferences and workshops by a number of the artform Boards; advocacy within ethnic communities to raise the profile of the arts and artists; and attempts to spread more widely information about and access to Council programs.

The result was a three-fold increase in the amount of funding directed towards 'ethnic' artists and projects between 1982 and 1985. By 1987, expenditure on multicultural arts nevertheless only constituted some 3.1 per cent of total Council expenditure on the arts. It was also during this period that the term 'multicultural' became a more commonly used term within Council rather than 'ethnic'. The association between multicultural arts (as it was then known) and community arts was also loosened with greater recognition of the diversity of artforms practised by migrant and NESB artists.

However, the artform Boards did not necessarily feel comfortable with these changes which, they felt, were being imposed upon them. They regularly called for the review of the multicultural program and expressed concern about its relevance and the pressures it placed on them. In the wake of these changes, there was on-going and fiery debate and challenge to the key criteria used by the artform Boards such as professionalism, excellence and creativity.

The third stage was once again initiated by a review of Council operations but this time it was a management review (the McLeay Report) and came in the wake of severe budgetary cutbacks which began to bite in 1986. In the same year, however, a review by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs reported favourably on Council activities. Their report, *Don't Settle for Less*, praised the multicultural arts priority programs and urged Council to allocate more resources towards them. This, it argued, would raise the Council's profile and ensure that it was both more equitable and more efficient in its delivery of services to migrants (Department of Immigration & Ethnic Affairs 1986, p. 292). These conflicting pressures coincided with increasingly vocal criticism from the Boards towards multicultural policy and they exerted continual pressure

which finally did lead to the abandonment of the central incentive funds.

A period of hiatus followed. Between 1987 and 1989, the Australia Council was reorganised and the position of multicultural arts officer fell vacant. During this period, as a result of an agreement between all the state arts ministries and the Australia Council, the term 'multicultural arts' was dropped. It was widely accepted that the term was problematic and even meaningless. It was replaced with 'Arts for a Multicultural Australia' (AMA).

In 1989, the present Program Manager-Multicultural, of the Australia Council, Mary Dimech, was appointed to help regenerate multicultural policy and programs. Within each artform unit there is now a designated staff member nominated to assist in matters relating to the AMA Policy. Council-wide policies and procedures have been implemented including target funding for each Board and Council itself, the establishment of ACMAC, research and publication programs, and continued advocacy both within Council, among ethnic community groups and the broader community. ACMAC has also attempted to institute regular exchange and dialogue with the Aboriginal Arts Board and one outcome of this has been the recent inclusion of South Sea Islanders within the definition of non-English speaking background.

A review of the AMA Policy in 1992 did not lead to its demise, rather it has been guaranteed another three years of operation. The review process highlighted specific impediments and difficulties in the implementation of the AMA Policy, but there appears to have developed a culture in which these can be more productively debated than was the case during the earlier two stages of the policy's existence. Out of this process, a new policy has been developed based on the experience of the last three years of the multicultural program. This period has also seen greater discussion and co-operation between the states and the Australia Council on policy and programs, although there are major differences and areas of disagreement between them.

Critical to the success of this third and present phase has been the decision to ensure the representation of NESB artists and practitioners on all the Boards and Committees of Council, and Council itself. Twice a year, these representatives meet as the committee known as ACMAC, the fourth multicultural committee at Council². Despite their vulnerable status, all the multicultural committees have performed a vital role in providing advice to Council and support to project officers. They have also formed a bridge with practitioners and the communities.

ACMAC has had a more stable and extended life than its predecessors having been formed in 1990, at the instigation of Sneja

Gunew, then a member of Council. It has not only survived, but continues to develop and refine its role and its functions. It has had to deal with some major problems. These include high turnover in membership as Committee members in the various Boards are replaced (many only have a one-year term). As well, NESB representatives have not always been fully briefed on their role (or indeed the fact that they have been designated as a NESB representative, something several have only discovered after their appointment and invitation to an ACMAC meeting), nor are they necessarily committed to the Arts for a Multicultural Australia Policy. However, ACMAC has proved to be pivotal in expanding the debates about multiculturalism and providing the NESB representatives with support and information and, in turn, providing advice to Council. They have been intimately involved in the redrafting of Council policy and have worked to develop closer and more productive relationships with the artform Boards and with the arts community generally.

The Big Picture

In this brief overview of the history of multicultural policy development at the Australia Council, the emphasis has been on an account of the institution and its processes. It has not been possible to address specifically the role of arts practitioners and other activists—be they academics, critics, administrators, curators and so on—who have worked both within and outside Council to propel the debates and put in place structures and networks to assist NESB artists. Their role has, however, been pivotal. They are the increasingly confident and organised constituency that the Australia Council has had to respond to. Apart from direct support to the arts and artists, and addressing its own internal structures, Council's recent response has been, for example, to give financial support to representative organisations such as NAMAN (National Arts for a Multicultural Australian Network) and it has also contributed to nation-wide research such as that undertaken by NAVA (National Association of Visual Arts).

But at an institutional level, there is one which has had the potential to create significant change and with which the Australia Council has had sporadic contact, and that is the federal government's own multicultural agency, firstly the Australian Institute for Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) and its successor, the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA).

Council's relationship with OMA has changed and intensified in the past two years. This shift is the result of OMA's own increasing recognition of the centrality of the arts and broadcasting and,

simultaneously, the Australia Council's move towards more collaborative partnerships in the multicultural sphere with both government and non-government agencies.

As already indicated, one of AIMA's most direct and critical contacts with the Australia Council came in 1982 when it evaluated the Australia Council's progress in relation to the services and support it provided for migrant artists and its multicultural programs. The focus here was not so much on the arts as such as on social justice and equity. AIMA's criticisms propelled the Australia Council into action by enabling those within Council who had been advocating on precisely these issues finally to break through and create new structures and programs. A more specifically arts-focused and collaborative relationship was later established between AIMA and the Multicultural Arts Committee of 1985–86. A Project Advisory Panel was established to supervise a Multicultural Arts Research project. It comprised representatives of AIMA, which was to conduct the research, and representatives of the Multicultural Arts Committee and Australia Council staff. The Council approved expenditure of \$53 070 with AIMA also contributing both funds and resources. The aim of the research was to document the circumstances and characteristics of 'ethnic' artists and arts groups and ascertain the views of these artists and the ethnic communities on their cultural and artistic needs.

Unfortunately, after almost eighteen months of planning and revision of the research brief, the initiative foundered, coinciding as it did with the restructure of Council, the winding up of the Multicultural Arts Committee and the demise of AIMA itself. Throughout 1987, there were attempts to revise and revive the project, with AIMA's successor, OMA, reiterating its support. It was divided into two parts, but only part one was undertaken. The results were never circulated and the project lapsed altogether by 1988³.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Australia Council have now entered into a different kind of partnership. In 1989, OMA published the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing Our Future*, a statement of the government's position towards and support for the notion of cultural and ethnic diversity and its policy 'for managing the consequences of cultural diversity' (OMA, 1989, p. vii). The *National Agenda* reflects the three strands of policy and institutional reform as defined by Wilenski through its statement of objectives: cultural identity (the expression of individual cultural heritage), social justice (access and equity) and economic efficiency (development and utilisation of skills and talents). Behind the development of the *National Agenda* was the government's observation that institutional structures had been 'unprepared' and 'unresponsive'

to the 'changes and challenges presented by a rapidly diversifying population in Australian society' (OMA, 1989, p. 7).

The *National Agenda's* approach to culture is very broad and the emphasis is on education, labour reform, access to services and so on. The arts were virtually ignored. Since 1989, however, the OMA has placed more of its resources into investigating and working within the area of the arts and broadcasting. At the same time, the Australia Council, through ACMAC, decided that one way of responding to the absence of the arts in the national agenda was to develop a working relationship with the OMA.

Several initiatives resulted. One is the recently completed OMA-funded report *Access to Excellence: Review of Issues Affecting Artists and Arts from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds*, which involved national consultations with arts practitioners and administrators in the performing arts, literature and community arts⁴. Another is more formal and institutionally based and that is the establishment of the National Working Party on Arts for a Multicultural Australia (NAMA) which has drawn together representatives from all the state and territories' arts departments and offices and ethnic affairs agencies, the National Arts for a Multicultural Australia Network and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils (FECCA), as well as Australia Council and OMA representatives. The Working Party is a potentially significant strategic intervention at departmental and ministerial level as it is a unique national forum specifically addressing itself to the arts and cross-cultural issues and also performing an advisory role to the Arts Ministers at both state and federal level through the Cultural Ministers Conference.

As a first step *The Big Picture: A Framework for Policies and Practices Relating to Arts for a Multicultural Australia* has been prepared to provide a statement of principles and policies which can be applied nationally as a guide to all government agencies. 'The Big Picture' directly responds to the gaps in the national agenda. It argues for a notion of culture as dynamic, culturally (and institutionally) inclusive, in a constant state of evolution, self-reflection and evaluation. It seeks to 'reassess old boundaries between traditional and contemporary cultural practices' and broaden 'our understanding of such notions as artistic excellence, innovation and professionalism'.

Whatever the limits created by the at times conflicting statutory responsibilities of the various government representatives within the NAMA Working Party who are bound by their own government's policy parameters, and the demands of the constituencies represented by the non-government agencies, such interventions as NAMA can propel more focused government support for multiculturalism at the level of cultural and arts practices. Furthermore, the Framework and the Working Party constitute a kind of challenge to the critics and

those who want to dismiss or see an end to the challenge and changes that multiculturalism and the arguments around cultural diversity and inclusivity have created.

The history of multicultural policy within the Australia Council suggests that while profound change is possible, there is equally profound resistance. When this resistance coincides with administrative or broader policy movements that call for restraint or reorganisation of priorities, then the result can be, and has been, retrograde. While institutions such as the Australia Council and the OMA may seem secure, that is not necessarily the case and the gains that have been achieved can be reversed. However, with the accumulation of experience and knowledge and greater community level organisation, the potential for consolidation and continuity is increased. It requires constant vigilance and continual negotiation and debate.

Notes

- 1 The term used to describe artists who were not Anglo-Celtic has itself been the subject of debate. In the 1980s, the term 'ethnic artist' was replaced by 'multicultural' which in turn was quickly abandoned in favour of the current 'non-English speaking background' (NESB).
- 2 As discussed, there have been three previous committees: one in 1980 which met once and ceased to function thereafter and two (1975-76 and 1985-86) which were abolished as the result of a review of Council Committees.
- 3 This was an analysis of the Australia Council's Ethnic Arts Directory data, a Directory compiled during the early 1980s of ethnic artists and arts groups.
- 4 Many of the specialist consultants engaged to carry out the review were members of ACMAC and the consortium was headed by Mary Kalantzis and Stephen Castles.

References

- Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, 1986, *Don't Settle for Less*, Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Canberra.
- Field, M., 1993, 'Exile, culture and imperialism', *24 Hours*, June, p. 42
- Murray, L., 1993, 'Time's up for Literature Board', *the Age*, 6 January, p. 11
- Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing the Future*, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Canberra
- Radic, L., 1993, 'A stroll down Lygon Street', *the Age*, 15 May, p. 10
- Review of Post Arrival Programs and Services for Migrants, 1978, *Migrant Services and Programs*, vol. 1 (Galbally Report), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra
- Wilenski, P., 1987, *Public Power and Public Administration*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney
- Yeatman, A., 1990, *Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Femocrats: Essays on the Contemporary Australian State*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney